Salience of Charter Schools in Educational Policy Debates in Three Canadian Provinces: 1993-2010

Michael Mindzak, B.A., M.Sc.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Education

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Faculty of Education, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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Abstract

School choice—the movement towards increased parental and student control over public education—has been endorsed extensively as a means of revitalizing and improving public schools. Part of this movement is the concept of charter schools, which have expanded rapidly in the United States and around the globe. In stark contrast, Canadians have remained relatively content with current educational arrangements; only 13 charter schools currently exist in Canada, all in the province of Alberta. This study sought to identify why charter schools have failed to situate themselves in Canadian education. The study used an agenda setting framework to determine the salience of charter schools as a public issue in three provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. Results largely indicate that over the past 18 years, charter schools have gradually declined as a salient issue. Additional discussion concerning the unique characteristics of Canadian education highlights factors that appear to discourage the expansion of such schools. However, although charter schools do not appear to be a current issue for Canadians, they may still emerge in the future, as parents and teachers continue to seek new ways of improving educational outcomes. Thus, although the impact of charter schools on public education has been minimal to date, they provide an illuminating lens towards better understanding educational reform and policy, as well as the fundamental values that shape education in Canada.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Arguments concerning the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of public education have in recent years provided a platform for significant school reforms to occur. One of the most unique and controversial reforms to occur in Canada took place in the province of Alberta in 1994, where legislation introduced charter schools as a means of augmenting the existing educational system. These schools would provide supplementary and alternative programs to students outside the traditional public system. Charter schools however remain a contested and controversial educational idea, and have not yet found systematic acceptance in the province of Alberta, or elsewhere in Canada. This investigation seeks to trace the development of charter schools in Canada by examining the historical and political factors which led to their initial formation as educational alternatives. It then employs an agenda setting framework to discern issue salience for charter schools in three provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. Finally, it connects charter schools to larger policy dynamics in Canadian education. Why charter schools have not significantly grown in Canadian education remains the central problem this study attempts to address.

Background of the Problem

The current debate concerning charter schools is situated in the larger context of school choice and school reform. In recent years, debates over public education have been largely focused on how the schooling system has become increasingly ineffective and inefficient (Bosetti, 2005; Stein, 2001). This perceived crisis in education has been compounded by recent developments in globalization and neoliberalism, which have dramatically shifted public philosophy concerning the goals and purposes of education

(Bosetti, 2005; Manzer, 1994. Thus, issues concerning the condition of education in Canada are now typically raised in relation to international competitiveness (Levin & Young, 1997; Wilkinson, 1994). Criticisms levelled against public education have included low student achievement on standardized test scores, increased government spending, and too much bureaucratic control in education (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007).

Since the 1980's there has been a rise in neoliberalism around the globe, an ideology which seeks minimal government intervention, greater competition, increased efficiency, and decentralization of control from states (Brigham, da Costa, & Peters, 2004??). Combined with globalization, this ideology has posited that the world is closer together than ever before, resulting not only in more interaction, but also a more competitive environment. In a time of increased global competition, school choice has been sought as a measure to improve the effectiveness by bringing market elements into schools and shifting control away from professional bureaucracies towards parents (Lawton, 2001). These reforms have been shaped in part by concerns over economic competitiveness, distrust in public institutions, and debates over spending more on education. Critics point to the role of global agencies such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank in facilitating this movement, which seeks to allow business enterprises to enter the education market for purely financial motives (Sinclair, 2000; Apple, 1999; Klees, 2002). As Davies and Quirke (2005) point out, "While choice movements are often disparate coalitions of social conservatives, business advocates, disaffected liberals, disadvantaged minorities, and alternative pedagogues, what neoliberals have done is articulate these varied concerns in calls for more market alternatives in education." Competitive pressures are said to improve the quality of

education as they force schools to respond to consumer demands, providing them with an incentive to improve in order to attract more students. Several nations including Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States, and Canada have all visibly taken similar steps towards educational reform during this period.

In England and Wales, during the early 1990's several reforms were introduced which created a more market-like organization in education. These changes were driven by a visible neoliberal ideology which promoted the superiority of market forces to improve competition in education, as well as a strong distrust in professional educators (Levin & Young, 1997). Similarly, reforms in New Zealand saw an increase in parental choice and charter school organization during the same period, resulting in changes guided by cost and efficiency concerns. Reform s in Australia mirrored those of New Zealand, where there was a strong devolution of control over school funding and in 1995 all schools effectively become charter schools. The United States has moved towards choice in a variety of ways including charter schools, of which over a million students now attend. In Canada, neoliberal changes have resulted in different reforms in each province, including Alberta (Taylor, 2001), British Columbia (Fallon & Paquette, 2008), and Ontario (Gidney, 1999). However, while educational policy reforms introduced in a number of industrialized nations have followed similar directions, local histories and conditions also play a role in how exactly these policies have been shaped (Taylor, 2001). The discussion of school choice and charter schools in Canada must be viewed within a global trend towards increasing choice in the provision and delivery of education. Thus, Canadian provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario have all reacted to these changes, but have done so in different ways.

Charter schools are meant to apply the principles of market competition to education as schools must compete to attract and enrol students. Charter schools have become an increasingly popular form of school reform, and have been introduced, in various forms, in New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Introduced in the province of Alberta in 1994, charter schools were proposed to provide a form of school choice unique from the public system. Currently, charter schools exist in the province of Alberta and have not been implemented anywhere else in Canada.

Rationale

The purpose of this study is to further understand the role of charter schools as educational institutions and how they may or may not gain status in Canadian education. In Alberta, charter schools have struggled to establish themselves as permanent alternatives in the public education system. Since 1994, they have shown promise, but have seemingly not lived up to expectations (Ritchie, 2010). Whether charter schools in Alberta will receive permanent status or if any other Canadian province will accept charter schools remains unclear (Raham, 1998). In the United States by contrast, charter schools have proliferated and continue to expand in almost every state, although educational comparisons between the United States and Canada must be made with care (Wilson & Lazerson, 1982). In Canada, several other provinces seemingly have moved towards increased school choice or discussed the idea of charter schools, but none have chosen to establish such schools in their respective jurisdictions. At the agenda setting level, this study hoped to discover whether the public as well as policymakers currently believe charter schools to be a significant educational concern, specifically in the

provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. The Alberta experiment with these schools may provide us with a lens to consider why Canadians have remained resistant to charter schools.

Statement of the Problem Situation

Charter schools are autonomous public schools, designed with the intent to make significant contributions and innovations in both the organization and delivery of education, as well as improvements in student learning. Although it remains unclear whether these schools will be able to achieve such goals, in recent years little has been said concerning the possible development of charter schools in Canada. This may be a result of charter schools failing to establish themselves outside Alberta, however there is a dearth of Canadian studies analyzing the concept of charter schools as a feasible alternative today (Ritchie, 2010). The literature concerning charter schools continues to expand rapidly in the United States, but only appears in limited fashion in Canada. Charter schools currently exist in a state of flux, where their future in the province of Alberta and their possible impact on education in Canada remains uncertain.

Those who argue for charter schools in Canada believe that they may very well improve the delivery of education throughout the various provinces (Freedman, 1997; Owens, 2004; Ritchie, 2010). Equally likely however is that charter schools are not superior in any real fashion, and divert attention away from improving public schools (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1997; Froese-Germain, 1998). Hence, the central problem in this analysis is whether the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, as well as Canada broadly, believe charter schools to be relevant in educational policy.

Research Questions

Three central questions guide this study. First: What is the promise of school choice and why were charter schools established? Extensive arguments concerning school choice have been articulated, particularly in recent years. The formation of school choice schemes as viable educational alternatives, however, have been slow to establish themselves. In this context, charter schools have been integrated into the public system in the hopes of revitalizing education and improving the system as a whole. What is the impact of school choice and charter schools thus far? These questions are central to the discussion in chapter 2.

Second: Are charter schools a salient issue for Canadians? Do Canadians currently perceive charter schools as a relevant issue? If not, at what time and why were Canadians interested in charter schools? What individuals or groups are/were involved in the charter school debate? These questions are central to the analysis in chapter 4.

Third: Why have charter schools failed in Canada? Specifically in Canada, charter schools were implemented with many ideals in mind that have not been realized. Do charter schools have a place in Canadian education? Why have Canadians refused charter schools in other provinces? What is the role of political culture and Canadian values in the charter school debate? These questions are central to the discussion and analysis in chapter 5.

Conceptual Framework

The debate concerning charter schools is situated within the larger dimension of school choice. Proponents of school choice argue that increased educational choices, such as charter schools, would primarily improve educational outcomes, stimulate

educational innovations, satisfy a need for more diverse educational options, and reduce the overall cost of education (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, 2001; Hassel, 1998; Owens, 2004; Ritchie, 2010). Conversely, opponents assert that charter schools would undermine the public school system, as they are based on neoliberal market values, promote segregation of students, and remove funding from the public system (Bosetti, 1998b; Buras & Apple, 2005; Lubienski, 2005; Paquette, 2005; Ungerleider, 2003).

This study sets out to examine the charter school debate in Canada within an agenda setting framework. Agenda setting research is useful in policy analysis as it helps to understand how and why an issue becomes, or does not become, a public problem (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Kingdon, 1995). Issue salience may be examined through a model which includes the media agenda, policy agenda, and public opinion (Soroka, 2002a). Through this, the policy debate may be highlighted and better understood at a specific point in time.

Charter school policies and politics differ greatly from one region to the next (Kirst, 2007). In Canada, charter schools have been affected by political and cultural factors which define Canadian education (Bosetti, 1995; Lawton, 2001). In addition to agenda setting, this study focuses on political culture, as policy issues remain largely influenced by fundamental values and traditions, along with the movement of ideas and how they gain or lose support over time (Heck, 2004). As school choice policies remain largely influenced by ideologies, political culture assists as a policy tool in understanding how policies may, or may not, be accepted in different places.

This study then offers an analysis of issue salience concerning charter schools along with an examination of political culture to determine why charter schools have not

significantly developed in Canada. By analyzing the school choice debate, it describes the conflicting ideological views towards charter schools in Canada. Through an agenda setting framework, it determines the salience of the charter schools issue and how it manifested as a policy issue. Finally, by recognizing the importance of political culture, it analyzes several key factors which have influenced the formation of charter schools. Utilizing these concepts, this study specifically addresses the salience of charter school debates in educational policy from 1993-2010 in three Canadian provinces.

Importance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the development, status, and outlook for charter schools in Canada. Charter school proponents assert that these schools of choice are capable of improved innovation and educational outcomes from the traditional education system. In contrast, opponents maintain that charter schools have not proven to be any more effective in these respects, while draining valuable resources away from the public system.

Although charter schools have not significantly permeated the Canadian public school systems, the concept of these schools and the larger issues concerning school choice continue to be espoused elsewhere (Hill & Jochim, 2009). Determining whether school choice options such as charter schools are both valuable and feasible educational options remains important for all stakeholders involved in Canadian education. Changes that could result from these options hold the potential to dramatically alter the delivery and organization of traditional public education systems (Bosetti, 2005). The results of the current study hopefully will reveal current themes or trends which may promote further research into charter school development in Canada.

Restatement of Research Purpose

This study seeks to trace the salience of charter schools in educational policy debates in three Canadian provinces; Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. By highlighting periods of increased salience, the issue of charter schools may be viewed over time, which may illuminate significant themes or trends concerning charter schools in Canadian education. In addition, this study looks at charter schools and educational policy broadly with respect to political culture, which provides possible frameworks for considering why charter schools have not found systematic acceptance throughout Canada.

Outline of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of the study is organized into four subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 contains a literature review of the issues surrounding school choice and charter schools, reasons for their acceptance and resistance in North American education, and current discussion of charter school results. Additionally, it continues to discuss specific developments in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario with respect to school choice and charter schools over the past two decades. Chapter 3 introduces agenda setting as a framework for evaluating the issue of charter schools and discusses the assumptions which guide the evaluation of charter school issue salience. Methodology and research procedures concerning data collection and analysis are also further outlined. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data collected, organized by province—Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, respectively. Chapter 5 connects the agenda setting analysis to other real-world indicators and characteristics which have shaped school choice and charter schools in Canada over the past two decades. Research implications as well as main conclusions summarize the study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter evaluates the literature pertaining to school choice and the charter school movement. Within this context, this review focuses on a discussion of the larger philosophical debates involved in educational choice, before moving into a more specific discussion of school choice and charter schools. Finally, a discussion of how school choice has manifested in Canada to date, specifically in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario is included. A conclusion summarizes and connects the major themes of this section.

Introduction to the Philosophical Debate

The concept of school choice holds its roots in liberal theories of government and citizenship (Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, & Sande 1998). These ideas may be traced back before compulsory state-sponsored education was established, where a predominantly private system of schooling met the needs of parents and students (Coulson, 2001). The debate over school choice, however, is situated within the larger political–philosophical debate between libertarians and communitarians. Thus, "Canadian concepts of educational purpose, models of educational governance, principles of educational policy design, and criteria of political evaluation are drawn from opposing ideological traditions of liberalism and communitarianism" (Manzer, 1994, p. 12). Moreover, "Underwriting this debate over the goals of public education in a liberal democratic society is the tension between majority rules and individual rights; between public and private interests, and between political equality and social inequality" (Bosetti, 1998a, p. 12). The fundamental tension surrounding choice in schooling thus rests in a long tradition of debates between individual versus collective goals of society.

From the very foundation of public education in the middle of the 19th century, the ideas of political liberalism have remained essential to educational policy (Manzer, 1994). Liberalism, in the classic sense, emphasizes respect for individual rights and personal autonomy, as "The fundamental characteristics of this tradition may be defined as promotion of 'the right'" holding precedent over "the good" (Bosetti et al., 1998, p. 11). Hence, the philosophy of liberalism underlies the ideas for school choice and subsequently the formation of charter schools in Canada. Classically, liberalism implies a fundamental respect for individual rights, combined with toleration for the rights of others. Thus, the role of the state should be limited, in contrast to more communitarian values which emphasize the role of the individual within the larger social community. Canadian public philosophy has generally struggled between both liberal and communitarian traditions, appeasing one side over the other during different periods.

In contrast, communitarian ideology espouses the need for individuals to place themselves and their rights in a larger concern of civic duty and collective responsibility (Sawa, 2003). The conception holds that humans are properly understood not as autonomous and self-interested individuals, but as social creatures purposeful only in groups (Brandl, 1998). Therefore, the communitarian defines legitimacy and justice as respect to tradition, custom, collective rights, and collective needs (Bosetti et al., 1998). Specifically in relation to educational governance, the libertarian position implies the existence of a private market where consumers hold the power to purchase or exit educational alternatives. On the other hand, as communities, all citizens should be given

the right to access and participate in public schools, and to collectively determine the functions and scope of such schools (Manzer, 2003).

Canada largely has remained committed to espousing collective rights in contrast to the United States which has focused more on individual rights. In comparison to our closest neighbours to the south, Canadians are generally characterized as being slightly more communitarian and Americans as slightly more libertarian (Bosetti et al., 1998; Lawton, 2001). Indeed, "Canadian political traditions have always been more communitarian than those of the United States" (Young & Levin, 1998, p. 294). The result of this fundamental tension between two constantly competing ideologies manifests itself into what may be described as a public philosophy (Manzer, 1994).

Public Philosophy and Education

A result of policies and philosophies, public schools are places where political ideas meet human communities. Issues in education naturally become arenas of political struggle, where ideas and ideologies come together into conflict, and also compromise. As a result of these debates, school choice policy varies depending on exactly what educators, parents, and elected officials want it to be (Bosetti, 2005). In this respect, Bosetti et al. (1998) recommend an examination of public philosophy to examine the roots of the school choice movement and charter school development in Canada.

A public philosophy implies the existence of a particular set of political ideas which holds widespread if not domain acceptance within the political community: "A dominant political ideology would constitute a public philosophy, but a public philosophy does not need to be formed from a single ideological position. It might be created from

conflict and compromise among the proponents of opposing doctrinal positions" (Manzer, 1985, p. 13). Similarly, Levin and Young (1997) note that:

> One of the most powerful factors defining a particular issue is people's sense of their own past and how that shapes what needs to be done and what is possible to do. At the same time, political jurisdictions are less and less isolated, so developments in one place do have an impact on others. And it seems to us self-evident that developments in education are linked with and strongly influenced by developments in the larger sphere of public policy and social thought. (p. 8-9)

In contemporary society, the concept of school choice holds different meanings for students, parents, teachers, and other individuals involved in education.

Manzer (1994) asserts that since the inception of Canadian public education in the late 19th century and despite particular regional and provincial differences, education in Canada has been largely shaped by a liberal political ideology. Hence, the political principles of public education in Canada have been dominated by liberal conceptions of the purpose of public education, of the proper criteria of political evaluation, and of state organization and public policy.

Our current era has been defined by Manzer as "technological liberalism" (neoliberalism or neoconservatism) which, primarily driven by technological change, has fostered the emergence of a global economy and resulting notions of competition have held profound implications for educational policy. This competition, not only among individuals but also among states, has driven educational polices in new directions towards effectiveness and efficiency. Neoliberal ideology views education in a setting dominated by a producer–consumer relationship, which has resulted in several new trends

in educational administration and organization. These changes have been far-reaching in educational policy:

> This is especially important now because this is a time of what might be called "conservative modernization" in education, a time when we are indeed being constantly told that the only solutions to our educational dilemmas are a combination of the neoliberal emphasis on marketization and choice and neoconservative and managerial emphases on standardizing curricula, teaching, and evaluation and on a return to "real knowledge." (Buras &Apple, 2005, p. 551)

Arising during the Enlightenment period and dating back to the 18th century under philosophers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, liberalism proclaimed that men were free and equal—naturally endowed with the right to life, liberty, and property. Classically, liberalism was dedicated to the protection of private property and the legal enforcement of contracts, as well the asserting the necessity of individual freedom (Steger & Roy, 2010). Government intervention in the market was ideally minimal, with the "invisible hand" ensured the most efficient allocation of resources.

Neo or "new" liberalism emerged in the 20th century in the post-WWI period, under leading economists such as John Maynard Keynes, which challenged classical liberal beliefs about the self-regulating market. However, neoliberal principles were not explicitly visible until the 1980s when leading nations such as United States and Great Britain sought new polices which challenged traditional liberal assumptions. Manifested in policy, Steger and Roy (2010) identify three main dimensions of neoliberal policies; deregulation (of the economy), liberalization (free trade), and privatizing (specifically of

traditionally state-owned enterprises). Neoliberals thus stress the superiority of free-market approach in the delivery of goods and services, the efficiency of private enterprise, and the shifting of control away from states towards the private sector.

Today, neoliberalism has emerged as a term, largely espoused by critics, of an ideological system which holds the market sacred, while maintaining a libertarian position hostile to government intervention (Mudge, 2008). In education, this has manifested in tensions between the state as holding the traditional monopoly over public education, and business which seeks to apply market elements and break these tradition barriers. Educators have been largely resisting to such encroachment, and view private enterprises as an attack on the public education model as a whole. As Apple (1999) highlights:

> The objectives in education are the same as those which guide its (Neoliberalism) economic and social welfare goals. They include the dramatic expansion of that eloquent fiction, the free market; the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility both inside and outside the school; the lowering of people's expectations for economic security. (p. 6)

Evidence of neoliberalism may be found in the shifting role of principals from instructional leaders to fiscal managers (Froese-Germain, 1998), an emphasis on human capital (Bosetti, 1998b), and a focus on standardized testing and other performance indications. Indeed, the ever-increasing availability of school and student performance indicators may be a cause towards choice demands (Raham, 1998). Neoliberalism then may be viewed as the rebirth of a market-oriented view of the world and how social,

political, and economic institutions should operate. Under globalization, neoliberal ideology has spread across the globe, creating numerous challenges for the traditional nation-state.

Neoliberal ideology further proposes that the forces of globalization have resulted in a world that is not only connected to a degree greater but that also is more competitive than ever before. Moreover, "the rationale for education reform is increasingly couched in terms of economic needs, especially in regard to international competitiveness" (Levin & Young, 1997, p. 5). Combined, there has been a general perception that education is in "crisis" and in need of systematic reform (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Froese-Germain, 1998; Robertson, 1998; Stein, 2001).

According to Taylor (2001), recent educational reforms in Canada have been neoconservative in their emphasis on traditional values and neoliberal in their emphasis on a revised human capital theory that draws simultaneously on the discourses of education for economic prosperity and the fiscal crisis of the state. Indeed, "in this economically competitive and rapidly changing era, parents were looking for an 'advantage' for their children" (Bosetti et al., 1998, p. 9). Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) similarly describe this trend where, "Increased globalization and a significant shift from a meritocratic society to a credential society has increased anxiety among middle-class parents regarding their ability to maintain their place in society and secure educational advantage for their children" (p. 91).

In Canada, by the early 1990s there appeared to be a growing consensus that Canadian education was lagging behind other nations as portrayed by indications of performance such as standardized tests. Thus, the perception was that:

> During the 1990s Canada saw considerable conflict in education. ...There has been increasing pressure...to move away from a single public education system through a variety of measures, such as a greater focus on testing and comparing of schools and students, parental choice of schools, increased funding of private schools, and reduced tax support. (Levin, 2005, pp. 56-57)

Whether neoliberal ideology is still dominant as a Canadian public philosophy remains difficult to determine. Campbell (1999) claims that we have reached the end of the neoconservative era, although our current philosophy remains elusive.

A concept of the public philosophy therefore does not offer an automatic formula or a complete guide for understanding social science (Ceasar, 2001). The function of a public philosophy is best used as a macro-level descriptive guide, which must be combined with the micro-level factors that surround education policy and reform. In Canadian education, with significant provincial and territorial differences, public philosophy can be criticized for "oversimplifying a complex reality" (Kuchapski, 2001, p. 126). However, clearly the early 1990s, when school choice arguments were being introduced and charter schools were legislated, was a period where neoliberal ideology largely influenced educational reform.

Modern School Choice Arguments

What may be called "modern school choice" was first articulated in the United States in the post-second world war period. These initial arguments for school choice schemes were entrenched in free-market principles, with economist Milton Friedman being perhaps the first to justify educational choice reforms along these lines. Friedman articulated the position that government control over education would be more effective

and efficient under a decentralized system, which would give parents and students more choice in educational matters, as well as increase competition between educational providers. Thus, his ideas provided a spark towards the movement for increased parental rather than state control over children's education (Hill & Jochim, 2009). Friedman's proposals were more akin to current initiatives for vouchers, which could be distributed based on access and need. He believed that his prescriptions would benefit education and that "The development of such arrangements...would make capital more widely available and would thereby do much to make equality of opportunity a reality, to diminish inequalities of income and wealth, and to promote the full use of our human resources (Friedman, 1962, p. 107). However, at the time of his proposals for change, Americans were generally satisfied with public schooling and Friedman's arguments were largely ignored (Hill & Jochim, 2009).

In this trend, choice reformers continued to assert several deficiencies in public education which demand systematic changes, particularly for low-income and other marginalized groups. Mario Fantini emerged as a supporter of increased participation between parents and teachers, educational equity, and decentralized authority. As Fantini and Young (1970) articulate in regard to increasing choice:

> There are many advantages to non-public schools, including a greater freedom in regard to the selection and personnel and a more direct and responsive relationship with the parents of the students. They also allow the poor the choice that is open to many middle-class parents: to educate their children elsewhere if they are dissatisfied with the performance of the public schools. (p. 17)

Educational shortcomings thereby were conceived as a result of flaws in educational organization and governance. Hence, an ethos towards total systematic educational reform became increasingly recognized as a legitimate movement in the attempt to improve education as public schools were increasingly criticized for not being open and responsive to the needs of students and parents.

Coons and Sugarman (1978) provided the next watershed in the choice movement with their expansive analysis of implementing educational vouchers in the United States. They argued that with current fiscal inefficiencies combined with no consensus on how to best educate children, choice options would best serve the broad goals of education, including the promotion of individual autonomy, parental choice, cultural pluralism, and racial integration. They also took into consideration other modern challenges such as who should be actively involved in education (the State, teachers, business), equality of access, and increasing parental participation. The concept of what would become charter schools was already being conceptualized. Indeed,

> One solution would be to establish each public school as an individual nonprofit corporation with a charter spelling out its independent power and duties. The terms of that charter would have to attend to a variety of matters, and all schools need not have the same charter. (Coons & Sugarman, 1978, p. 163)

As they concluded at the time, "What remains wanting is recognition by legislators of the strong public aspiration for more family responsibility and—what may be the same—legislative perception that choice represents a living political option" (p. 220). It would take another decade for school choice to finally begin to emerge as a viable option in education.

In the past 20 years, arguments for school choice have been revitalized, particularly in North America. This concurrent movement may again be connected to a particular paradigm shift, which linked the political process to educational organization. When Chubb and Moe (1990) published their work proposing a radical departure from previous choice arguments, the tangible school choice movement began in earnest. They argued that government control over public education has inevitably fostered a structure of large bureaucracies, while perpetuating a system of education which becomes increasingly inefficient and unresponsive to the needs of parents and students.

In reaction to these and similar claims, educational administrators and policymakers have sought alternatives to traditional public schooling to improve educational outcomes. In this respect, Chubb and Moe represented an important evolution in the school choice, for many critics had based their arguments on the assumption that schooling issues are insulated from the political process. Instead, they proposed a more influential role for government than merely funding choice schemes. This was a compromise of sorts, revealing the need for school autonomy, but also the desire for accountability and state supervision. Hence,

> While Friedman's theories have all but been ignored in education, Chubb and Moe's work found a receptive audience. Parents, business leaders, and policymakers, dissatisfied with the performance of the current system and fed up with unsuccessful reform efforts, turned to choice. After Chubb and Moe, many of the ideas behind the choice movement focused on describing the relationships between schools and governmental oversight agencies. Thus was born the charter schools movement and the idea of school contracting. (Hill & Jochim, 2009, p. 8)

Thus, since around 1990, school choice as a movement has taken off, both in American education where many of its ideas were born, but also internationally. The expansion of school choice has been noted across several countries in the past two decades, particularly in England, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. Although each nation has come to embrace choice in different ways, each has implemented arrangements which take the idea of school choice and charter schools into their respective educational systems.

In 1988 England and Wales established grant maintained schools (GMSs) as a part of the public education system. These schools were regular public schools which had opted out of their local education authority and were run by governing bodies of trustees to whom principals were directly responsible (Brigham et al., 2004). As such, these schools (particularly "specialist" or "beacon" schools) are essentially charter schools in all but name. Great Britain has maintained a high priority on promoting choice, but has done little to support the growth of new schools (Heyneman, 2009). In New Zealand all schools are now charter schools, as they remain defined as independent schools but rely on public funds. In 1989, the country's education system went under a rapid restructuring, largely responsive to the economic depression (Brigham et al., 2004). This sudden transition forced a major shift away from central authority to individual schools, where boards of trustees oversaw spending in each school. Each school is also accountable to its Charter, which is prepared by the school board. The results of this move towards compulsory chartering remain mixed, with one issue being that New Zealand schools are not subjected to external examinations, which make performance indicators difficult to determine.

In North America, both the United States and Canada have also come to embrace school choice, although to different degrees. The U.S. has moved towards several forms of choice in different states; charter schools have appeared as the most popular (and acceptable) form of school choice. In the United States, the State of Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991. This movement continued to expand rapidly and by 1998, 34 states and the District of Columbia had enacted charter legislation (Hassel, 1999). From 1992 to 2004, 36 states and the District of Columbia established similar provisions. As of 2004, 2,993 charter schools operated in the U.S., with an enrolment of 698,142 students (Terzian & Boyd, 2004, p. 135). There are now over 4,500 charter schools, totalling a student population of approximately 1.4 million students (Christensen, Meijer-Irons, & Lake, 2010). Canada, in contrast, has remained more tentative towards charter schools and school choice (Holmes, 2008).

Hence, in the past two decades, educational reforms (including demands for school choice) have been significantly influenced by factors such as fundamental changes in the economy and social relations, pluralism, globalization, technological advances, and a rise in conservative politics. During this period, these debates have "dominated educational reform policy and research" in Western industrialized nations (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007, p. 89). Feasible alternatives available to families within the "education market" have broadened to include more choice within the public school systems, as the rules for choosing between public schools have been liberalized (Brigham et al., 2004). However, school choice ideas have also broadened to encompass a variety of measures which have altered the organization and delivery of public education.

Definition and Features of School Choice

Issues related to school choice, program choice, and accountability have become increasingly recognized as being central to discussions on how to improve primary and secondary education both in Canada and around the globe (Brigham et al., 2004; Raham, 1998). However, the concept of educational or school choice holds different meanings for different people (Wilkinson, 1994). School choice implies that policies are in place to give parents and families choice over how and where their children will be educated (Brigham et al., 2004). For some, this notion implies that choice should be provided within the current existing educational structure, while others assert that schools must exist outside the traditional confines of public education. In the United States, this has resulted in the majority of states currently engaged in reforms allowed for increased school choice (Hoxby, 2001). The idea is not new, but has become increasingly debated and expanded amongst educators and educational stakeholders at all levels in recent years.

Most children still attend a public school to which they are assigned, typically based on where they live. By deciding where to live, families can generally determine which public school(s) their children will attend. In reality, then, parents are making a *school choice* for their children, in deciding where or where not to live at any given time (Henig & Sugarman, 1999). Additionally, in most countries school choice has always existed for families through the option of educating children in private schools (for those willing and able to pay fees) and in some countries through home schooling (providing the education is approved by the state). Discussions of school choice have expanded to include aspects concerning private and magnet schools, specialized alternative schools,

vocational schools, denominational schools, and charter schools. It also covers issues surrounding change of residence, open enrolment plans, student transfers across districts, as well as tax and tuition credits to reimburse parents for private schools (Corwin & Schneider, 2005). Brigham et al. (2004) offer a typology of the five main manifestations of school choice today:

- Public School: A school that is typically owned and administered by an elected school board and overseen by a ministry of education. It receives funding directly from the state and is directly responsible to government. Usually offered to all students.
- Private School: An independent school which is autonomous from the state system of education and is not run by a school board. Reasons for independence may be based on cultural, pedagogical, philosophical, or religious reasons. It typically operates through private funding, although it may receive some public support.
- Home School: Schooling in which the parents have the responsibility of providing an educational program to their child or children. Home school may or may not be under the supervision or regulation of a board of education or the ministry.
- Educational Vouchers: Are public/private funds which follow students to the specific school in which they are enrolled. The monetary value of the voucher may be dependent on the students' age, academic ability, gender, or socioeconomic class as well as the attending schools' location, size, and record of achievement. Similarly, tax-credits have been used as a means to provide partial

reimbursement for parents who choose to enrol their child outside of the public system.

- Charter School: A publicly sponsored and typically publicly funded autonomous school which, to various degrees, is free from government control, but is held accountable by the provisions of its enacting charter.

Generally, school choice implies a market-oriented approach to education, based on the assumption that once parents and students are free to choose from a range of educational options, schools will become more innovative and responsive to the needs of their clients. It is believed that with less regulation and bureaucratic controls, schools will produce superior educational outcomes and increased parental and student satisfaction, and be held to higher standards of accountability (Bosetti, 2004). Thus, the system as a whole would be more effective and efficient due to competitive pressures. In the past few decades, educational alternatives within the "education market" have expanded to allow for increased choice within the public schools system (Brigham et al., 2004). By removing traditional controls over education held by the state, parents and students would be free to choose schools that best represent their own educational demands. Additionally, the removal of unnecessary layers of bureaucracy would reduce ever-increasing school expenditures and allow for more direct financial control at the local level (Chubb & Moe, 1990; West, 1982). The assumption is that once parents and students are able to choose from a range of educational options, schools will begin to differentiate themselves in response to their clients' needs, attempting to offer "better quality" education than their competitors (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007).

Arguments Against School Choice

While school choice has gradually expanded in the past 20 years around the globe, many critics have been extremely vocal against such changes. While arguments towards school choice have been typically promoted from libertarian and free-market positions, arguments against choice arise from those supportive of more communitarian values (Sawa, 2003). As Barlow and Robertson (1994) contend against increased choice:

> From these explicit and implicit foundations has grown a wide array of schools of choice, which, although they may vary in degree, vary little in kind. Each model begins with false premises about the failure of schools, supports the entitlement of parents to own education as well as their children, and condemns the evils of regulation. Each believes in competition, the necessity of failure to create success, the safety of similarity, and the need to control teachers. (p. 190)

Arguments against increased choice remain both ideological and organizational, and have been typically espoused by those who claim support for public schools, particularly teacher federations. This is not surprising, as school choice measures attempt to move educational decision making away from teachers, and into the hands of parents and students. However, arguments against choice include not just control over decision making, but also over control of what the goals, values, and purposes of education ought to encompass (McLaughlin, 2005).

Central to opposition of "market-based" educational reform is that school choice is driven by a neoliberal ideology which attempts to economize and devalue education into an outcome focused system. Consumer choice, efficiency, and competition are keywords which guide the choice movement. Critics contend that this focus on profit

will lead to sacrificing the diverse needs of students or perhaps to seeking only those students whose education can be provided at less expense (Osborne, 1999). For example, if schools charge additional fees directly or indirectly for expenses such as transportation, certain students who cannot afford the extra cost are automatically excluded. Indeed,

> The notion that market competition will improve the quality of education by providing greater choice is based on flawed premises. This approach views education as a product, and parents and students as the only consumers of this product. It forgets that others have a legitimate civic and monetary investment in the nature and quality of our schools. (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1997, p. 21)

Education as a public service should not be treated as a commodity. Choice also raises concerns over diversity, as a market-based system of education may in fact lead to increased stratification and segregation of students, based on differences not only in academic ability but also perhaps on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Lewington & Orpwood, 1995; Lubienksi, 2005).

A second line of reasoning contends that increased schools of choice would divert attention and resources away from public schools. Public education which relies on public funds is already strained and often faces budgetary difficulties. Again, according to Barlow and Robertson (1994), "one or two charter schools—in Alberta or any other province—will not bring public education to its knees. What it will do, however, is divert dollars and attention from improving all schools to enhancing a few" (p. 211). The view is that a two-tiered educational system will emerge out of choice arrangements, where there are "winners and losers" as some students will attend "superior schools" while others will not (Bosetti, 1998b). Other arguments include attempts to decrease

teacher salaries and remove teacher unions, as many choice supporters believe that salaries should be negotiated between principals and teachers directly at a school level, whether or not parents are capable of making sound educational judgments regarding the value and quality of teaching and learning, and whether schools of choice actually produce superior educational results (Froese-Germain, 1998). Opponents of school choice have voiced their concerns in a Canadian context, particularly in response to reforms in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario.

While arguments for enhanced school choice have been popularized and established dramatically in the past few decades, there remains considerable opposition to these changes. Opponents to school choice schemes argue above all that choice would destroy the public education system as a whole and see charter schools as the beginnings of privatization of education (Robertson, 1998; Wagner, 1999). Critics such as Lubienski (2005) point out that schools which must yield to competitive pressures increasingly spend resources on marketing and other promotional activities, rather than on improving the quality of education they provide. Similarly, Paquette (2005) describes equity issues concerning who truly gets to choose, socioeconomic streaming or "cream skimming" (choosing superior students), and societal balkanization as a result of school choice schemes. Teacher associations have also become strong opponents to any sort of school choice schemes (Lawton, Bedard, MacLellan, & Li, 1999). Whether Canadians have accepted or will accept any school choice schemes such as publicly funded private schools, vouchers, or specifically charter schools remains difficult to determine. Hence, school choice remains a concept that continues to expand and alter our perceptions concerning the provision of public education. Although most students still attend a

public school, typically the closest available school in their respective district, school choice ideology has either created reform, or at least initiated new debates concerning the provision of education. One of the most visible debates has emerged with the formation of charter schools in recent years.

Definition and Features of Charter Schools

The fastest growing form of school choice today in the United States are charter schools (Kemerer, 2009), which have emerged as perhaps the most radical educational reform since the second world war (Sarason, 1998). Charter schools may be best described as independent public schools (Owens, 2004). They are publicly funded but operated as semi-independent organizations under a particular charter, which must be renewed typically on a 3- to 5-year basis. Therefore, they must abide by the mandated curriculum, as well as be accountable to the public system in respect to spending, fulfillment of their charter mandate, and student performance. Beyond this, each school is primarily responsible to the parents and students of the school (O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000). As such, they are schools of choice with the freedom to implement a particular educational philosophy for their students. Perhaps most importantly, since they gain funding on a per-pupil basis, charter schools are subject to competitive market pressures, as well as asserting a parent-centered approach to educational provision (Maranto, Kayes, & Maranto, 2006). Although independent of many traditional restrictions, they still operate under the discretion of the public school system. Hence, they have been described as "hybrid" institutions: although they rely on market principles to attract students, the schools remain within the public school system.

Charter schools differ significantly depending on a variety of factors. In the United States for example, each of the current 41 states with enabling charter legislation has a unique combination of features. These include differences in regard to eligible founders and authorizers, funding arrangements (of different amounts), curricular and labour requirements, and student eligibility criteria. Consequently, "the environment in which charter schools operate varies widely across states according to enabling legislation" (Brewer & Hentschke, 2009, p. 233).

Charter schools in the U.S. have expanded to provide schooling for over a million students and continue to expand. However, data concerning the overall effectiveness of charter schools have yielded mixed results thus far. There are already over 200 studies which have analyzed charter school achievement, and many of these studies have found improved educational outcomes and performance in comparison to traditional public schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009). In contrast however, "The claim that choice schools improve student achievement cannot be proven" (Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p. 21; see also Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1997). Teasley (2009) discusses the problems in defining student outcomes and student success, and thus many studies form conclusions on achievement based on very different definitions.

Betts (2009) similarly finds the empirical results of charter schools mixed at best concerning the effects of charter schools competition on public education. There also remains an ambiguous relationship concerning on how parents make decisions to choose a charter school. Nield (2005) found that parents often lacked information, particularly those without a college education. Moreover, they do not have the social networks of knowledge of the education system to make such decisions, leaving them

unable to guide or advocate for their children's education. Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) found similar results in a Canadian context. In Alberta, it also remains debatable whether or not charter school students are performing in superior fashion to other students (Bosetti, 1998a; Ritchie, 2010).

Charter schools also operate with public funds—which requires them to have some sort of public oversight and regulation. A charter specifies the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of both parties (the school and the state) and is typically revocable due to poor performance, or renewable for good performance. Although a simple idea on paper, in practice it remains very difficult to implement (Brewer & Hentschke, 2009). Many charter schools have been forced to close because of inadequate funding and strict charter school laws governing their performance. However, many charter schools have also closed due to mismanagement of funds by their governing boards. The mixed results that have emerged thus far again reflect the fundamental differences rooted in ideology. For example, charter schools have increasingly closed in recent years (Christensen et al., 2010). For advocates of charters, this trend is a positive sign, signaling that ineffective schools are closing while parents are choosing to send their children to better schools (Hassel, 1999). In contrast, charter opponents would infer that the data are indicative of the failure of charter schools (Corwin & Schneider, 2005). Hence, accountability issues surrounding charter schools also remain extensively discussed, debated, and inconclusive.

Charter schools have become an increasingly popular form of injecting school choice concepts into public education systems; they "have evolved from a single concept small in scope and narrow in impact to a national movement to create public schools of choice"

(Karanovich, 2009). Their popularity stems from the fact that in many ways charter schools represent a sort of compromise between those who advocate for increased school choice and those who support traditional publicly funded schools. Within this environment, the idea for increasing school choice and charter schools has been extended in Canada.

School Choice in Canada

Provincial control, religious affiliation, and language rights continue to distinctly shape the formation of educational organization and policy in Canada. As the various Canadian provinces joined confederation, each had already established its own system of free, universal, and compulsory education, and after 1867 by the provisions within section 93 entrenched in the British North America (BNA) Act, every province was given the exclusive jurisdiction over education. From the beginning, the Canadian provinces each organized pragmatically according to current demographics and religious affiliations, and different accommodations for Protestants and Catholics emerged throughout the nation. The foundations of Canadian education is then distinct, particularly from the United States, in that there is not a distinct separation of church and state, which has fundamentally determined the Canadian pattern of providing public funding to separate and denominational schools (Wilson & Lazerson, 1982).

In response to the BNA Act asserting provincial control, there emerged five different educational arrangements in the Canadian provinces according to religious affiliations. In Quebec a dual-confessional system, Catholic and Protestant, emerged. In 1988, Quebec changed to linguistic school districts. Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan developed a publicly funded separate school system, administered by their own departments or boards of education. Similarly, the three northern territories are

characterized by a separate school system; however, they are administered by the federal government.

Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Manitoba all adopted informal arrangements to provide funding for denominational schools. Although officially there is only one public school system, informal political compromises allow religious schools to receive state funds with varying degrees of state supervisions attached (Wilson & Lazerson, 1982). Until 1969, Newfoundland provided exclusive support for denominational schools, but has since converted its entire system into a secular public system (Holmes, 2008). Lastly, until 1977 British Columbia did not fund any religious schools, but has since expanded public funding to both denominational and independent schools.

As Canada is a bilingual country, the constitution recognizes French and English as its two official languages. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (specifically section 23) defines

> the conditions under which Canadians have the right to access publicly funded education in either minority language. Each province and territory has established French-language school boards to manage the French-first-language schools. In the province of Quebec, the same structure applies to education in English-first-language schools. (Council of Ministers of Education Canada [CMEC], 2010, "Minority-Language Education," (para. 13)

Since 1995 both Newfoundland and Quebec have abolished their denominational systems and replaced them with districts aligned along linguistic lines, with similar changes in New Brunswick, Canada's only official bilingual province (Lawton, 2001).

Given that educational policy resides under provincial authority, the degree of school choice differs provincially throughout Canada. When discussing school choice in the Canadian context, it should be noted there already exists considerable choice within each province's educational system. As the CMEC (2010) outline:

> The legislation and practices concerning the establishment of separate educational systems and private educational institutions vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Three jurisdictions provide for tax-supported separate school systems that include both elementary and secondary education. These separate school systems reflect the constitutionally protected right to religious education for Roman Catholics or Protestants, when either group is the religious minority in a community. Public and separate school systems that are publicly funded serve about 93 per cent of all students in Canada. Six jurisdictions provide partial funding for private schools if certain criteria, which vary among jurisdictions, are met. No funding for private schools is provided in the other jurisdictions, although they still may be regulated. ("Separate and Private Schools," (para. 18)

There exists then choice within the same province, among districts, choice within districts, and choice outside districts to various degrees in the provinces. In respect to private schools,

> half of Canada's ten provinces provide some funding to private schools, two for historic reasons (Saskatchewan and Quebec), one for reasons of equity (Alberta), one as a response to a strong political coalition and sympathetic government (British Columbia), and one to accommodate unfulfilled constitutional requirements (Manitoba). (Lawton, 2001, p.12)

Ontario is the only Canadian province outside the Atlantic region that does not provide financial support to independent schools, as neither provincial or federal taxes provide any form of tuition relief in K-12 private education (Robson, 2001, p. 27). Where provincial power and autonomy along with regional differences remain essential, discussion of school choice, and hence charter schools, remains extremely complex.

Nevertheless, there has been a visible movement towards integrating more school choice in Canada over the past two decades. According to Ungerleider (2003),

> In many jurisdictions—most notably Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia—governments are retreating from the core Canadian values of trying to achieve equality. They are saying that *inequality* fuels the competition leading to economic progress. Provincial governments in those jurisdictions have generally been reducing the role of government. (p. 183)

These resulting changes have made it appear possible for changes, such as charter schools, to exist (or potentially exist) in those provinces specifically.

Moving Towards Choice in Alberta

The movement towards charter schools in Alberta began under the leadership of Premier Ralph Klein in 1993. By 1995, Alberta's Minister of Education, Halvar Jonson, offered his government's rationale for introducing Canada's first charter schools as "Charter schools are another enhancement to the public school system. They are an opportunity to seek innovative methods and learning environments that will lead to improved student learning" (The Fraser Institute, 1999, "Vaughan Street School," para. 8). He also repeatedly emphasized the experimental nature of charter schools, suggesting that they would be a pilot project which would be evaluated at a later date (Gereluk,

2000; Wagner, 1998). Subsequently, the opposition remained concerned that the concept had not been thoroughly examined, a notion that would be supported by later research (Bosetti, 1998a; Bosetti et al., 2000). The establishment of charter schools in Alberta in 1994 remains essentially unchanged, as the provisions initially legislated have remained largely intact.

Wagner (1998) offers a comprehensive analysis of Alberta's educational policy since 1971. He finds a definitive continuation of favourable school choice policy, evidenced by the development of alternative school funding in the 1970s, acceptance of private schools (as a result of the Wiebe case), and the New School Act of 1988 which took a very accommodating stance towards school choice. This would all culminate towards the eventual establishment of charter schools in the province. As Wagner concludes:

> Clearly charter schools are consistent with the policy direction that the PC government has undertaken since the 1970s. Those schools are not an unusual or radical break with previous policy. Those who claim that charter schools will lead to the end of public education in Alberta should remember that the same charge was thrown at the new School Act of 1988. Indeed, some public education supports were concerned about the PC government's favourable stance towards private education years before that. ...when one considers official policy documents, the statements of education ministers, or the government's critics, there is an unbroken consistency from the 1970s through the 1990s that the Conservative government has smiled on private education and educational choice.

> In this sense, it is really absurd to see charter schools as a completely novel approach of the Klein government. (1998, p. 234)

Whether a continuation of Progressive Conservative policy, or a radical new reform, charter schools emerged as a contentious educational issue in 1994. When Albertans elected the Klein government a year earlier, one of his first goals was to cut $239 million from the education budget (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). It was also reported that question period in the Alberta legislature had turned into a "rowdy exchange" when then Liberal leader Laurence Decore asked Premier Ralph Klein to clarify what a charter school was (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). Nevertheless, Alberta, with its own educational history and policy environment, has continued to support proposals for school choice, which has included charter schools. Indeed, Alberta continues to lead the way towards school choice in Canada (Holmes, 2008).

Alberta was the first, and to date only, Canadian province to permit the establishment of charter schools, beginning in 1994. Alberta's charter schools incorporate the general features of charter schools outlined above, but with certain distinctive features. They must be operated by nonprofit societies and cannot be religiously affiliated. Additionally, they must hire certified teachers and abide by the provincially mandated curriculum. Their charter contracts must be renewed on a 5-year basis, which must be approved by the Minister of Education (Ritchie, 2010). Legislation in Alberta currently permits up to 15 charter schools to exist (Alberta Education, 2009). Currently there are 13 in operation, with a total enrolment of over 7,000 students (Ritchie, 2010).

Charter schools must compete academically with all other students, and students in Alberta are required to take the same provincial examinations in grades 3, 6, and 9 and a diploma examination in grade 12. Charter schools receive the same amount of funding as a traditional school, which is provided to the school on a per-pupil basis. However, thus far, many charter schools have struggled to meet the financial demands of their schools. Initially, they were not provided with extra funding to cover the costs of facilities, a cost not borne by public institutions. Transportation also has not been covered, forcing many students to find their own means to arrive at school. Lastly, as a measure of cost reduction, teachers in charter schools are paid less than their public counterparts, although they may choose to be represented by the Alberta Teachers' Association and collectively bargain (Ritchie, 2010). These measures may indicate a move towards privatization where the cost of education may be moved away from public funds and instead out of parental incomes. Moreover, charter policy emphasizes "community involvement" with local organizations for fundraising purposes, which may allude to encouraging schools seeking outside sources of funding.

Moving Towards Choice in British Columbia

Under the Social Credit government of the late 1970s, B.C. began to provide government funding to private schools in the province, based on a proportion of public school per-pupil funding (Ungerleider, 2003). In British Columbia the government pays 50% of the cost of religious schools that meet rigorous provincial standards. On September 1, 1989, the British Columbia new School Act was announced, which contained legislation containing lucid statements concerning Social Credit ideology of choice based on competition (Ungerleider, 1996). Furthermore, beginning in 2001, the

Liberal government in B.C. began to introduce a series of changes in educational policy. Central to these reforms was the idea that the province needed to be more open to market-based approaches towards the provision of education. In 2002, the B.C. government introduced the School Amendment Act (Bill 34) which largely redefined the policy goals and direction of education in the province. According to Fallon and Paquette (2008), responses to the bill have been largely negative by stakeholders in education, who view the policy changes as guided by rhetoric of choice, efficiency, and a free-market approach to education in the province. Thus, the policy directions found in Bill 34 (2002) took the view that the public school system in B.C. had failed to deliver what was required to meet the diversity of needs of students and communities (Fallon & Paquette, 2008).

Although the B.C. government wanted to inject competition through choice in the education system, they maintained the standing notion that schools should still be publicly owned, funded, and regulated. Politically, the movement towards the implementation of this bill also holds similarities to Alberta's School Act described above, where the Campbell government appeared to have been directed by a neoliberal agenda, with educational stakeholders and interest groups being largely left out of the process. Although these changes point towards increasing school choice in the province, charter schools still do not exist in B.C.

Moving Towards Choice in Ontario

After the Progressive Conservative government won the 1995 provincial election, Premier Mike Harris appointed John Snobelen as Minister of education. After this appointment, "Between June 1995 and the spring of 1998, the 'Mike Harris government'

imposed changes on Ontario's schools that were remarkable in scope, in the sheer speed of execution, and in the turmoil they engendered" (Gidney, 1999, p. 234). Initiatives included the Common Curriculum, establishment of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and College of Teachers, and centralization of financial control. Additionally, shortly after this appointment, Snobolen was dramatically filmed arguing that there needed to be some sort of "crisis" in education, even if it needed to be created, to encourage educational reforms. These statements resulted in calls for his resignation, as well as increased distrust between the Ministry and teacher associations.

In 1997, Snobelen introduced Bill 160 (the Education Quality Improvement Act). Critics argue that the purpose of this bill was to cut education spending, and reduce the power of the teachers' unions in order to privatize Ontario's public education system. According to Schugurensky (1997):

> For better or worse, the passage of Bill 160 marked the beginning of a new era in the education of Ontario's students. Despite the massive protests by 126,000 Ontario teachers, Bill 160 passed in December of 1997. The bill represents a severe departure from Ontario's educational tradition by transferring control of the most important aspects of education from elected school boards to the government and its representatives. Perhaps the most controversial stipulation within the Bill was to remove critical parts of teachers' working conditions from the realm of collective bargaining. Chief among these was the loss of control over preparation time and class sizes. The bill also eased the transition of commercial advertising into Ontario classrooms. Although these amendments

> have been offered as a means of improving education, the Ontario public acknowledges that is purely an economic policy. (para. 1)

According to Bedard and Lawton (1998), "The commitment of the Harris government to Bill 160 was nevertheless unshakable: it conformed with the efficiency and cost-cutting vision of the Progressive Conservatives' election platform" (p. 50). Deficit reduction was the key priority of this period in Ontario, and there was a pronounced belief that the passage of Bill 160 essentially paved the way for charter schools and a two-tiered system of education (MacPherson, 2004).

In Ontario, the Catholic system continues to be fully publicly funded while other faiths are not. This arrangement, which is similar to that of several other provinces, became an extremely contentious issue around the year 2000, when several minority groups argued for school funding. Indeed, the issue reached the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which ruled that Ontario should provide funding for either all or no faith-based schools in the province. However, the Canadian Supreme Court ruled that because the arrangement is entrenched in the constitution, it is legal.

A final issue concerning an increase in choice occurred in 2001, when the provincial budget announced the introduction of the Equity in Education Tax Credit, with the intention of partially supporting parents who had been seeking more choice in education for their children. The credit was calculated separately for each child based on the eligible tuition fees paid on behalf of the child. The tax credit would reimburse parents 10% of eligible fees for a child enrolled in an eligible independent school in Ontario. The tax credit according to the Ontario Ministry of Finance (2001) ensured that:

> In doing so, Ontario joins other provinces who support educational choice. British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Quebec all support educational choice by providing grants to independent schools. Ontario is taking a different approach by providing support directly to parents so that they can make the decisions that they believe are right for their children. (para. 4)

The tax credit received major criticisms, and was accused of undermining the public education system. Opposition Leader Dalton McGuinty was critical of the tax credit, and upon his subsequent election as Premier, his Liberal government removed the credit in Ontario on December 18, 2003.

Summary of the Literature Review

This review has attempted to provide a comprehensive view of the development, establishment, and current debates in respect to school choice and charter schools. School choice arguments have stemmed, in part, from dissatisfaction with comprehensive schools, perceived low educational standards in public schools, and poor student achievement, particularly among minority and socially disadvantaged groups (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). Underlying this discourse has been a very visible neoliberal ideology, which has accentuated the growth of the choice movement. With this new emphasis on efficiency, a push for education to operate according to free-market principles has proliferated (Froese-Germain, 1998; Stein, 2001). Within this context, charter schools have emerged as a viable educational option in the last 20 years, and continue to be pushed as an alternative to public schools by educational reformers. With school choice schemes and charter schools growing rapidly in the United States and internationally, this study attempts to deal with the question of why charter schools have failed to expand and

establish themselves in Canada. Moreover, why are these schools solely located in the province of Alberta? By examining the agenda setting evidence from Canada, specifically in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, as well an analysis of political culture, this study seeks to determine the current status and future outlook of charter schools in Canada.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Charter schools in Canada appear to have remained largely at the agenda setting level, with all provinces other than Alberta yet to pass legislation allowing such schools to exist. Even in Alberta, however, charter schools have not substantially expanded and they appear to remain a contentious issue between stakeholders. In order to evaluate the current status of charter schools and the school choice debate as an issue for Canadians, this study employs an expanded agenda setting model to determine the relative salience of these problems. The study looks specifically at newspaper articles, political debates, and public opinion in Canada with respect to charter schools. Using longitudinal data from the past two decades, charter schools issue salience may be determined for various years throughout the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, as well as for any discernable themes and trends. The results of this analysis are presented in chapter 4.

Frameworks for Policy Analysis

Among the competing definition for what exactly the study of public policy constitutes, most agree that policies result from decisions made by governments, and that both action, and inaction, are central to policy analysis (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). For Pal (1992), public policy is defined as "a course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems" (p. 2). Additionally, all agree that studying policy is a difficult, contested, and complex task (Heck, 2004). In determining an adequate framework to analyze the issue of charter school in Canada, this study sought a model which balanced between traditional, rational models of policy analysis, and more detailed, nuanced, critical models. As Fallon (2006) describes:

> Policy processes cannot simply be explained in traditional terms, i.e., that the policy process smoothly generates the most rational policy. ... In reality, policy-making is a complex, messy, and contested process, involving negotiation, and power plays among groups and individuals over control of limited resources. (p. 47)

Traditional modes of policy analysis typically focuses on sequential, linear models which tend to delineate a relatively straightforward form of policy making. Rational views of policy-making are derived from economic theories, where individuals decide a course of action from a range of alternatives which maximizes benefits while minimizing costs. Its chief assumption is that policy actors act rationally—that is, they are self-interested, have standard preferences, and have accurate information about their situations (Pal, 1992). Thus, "from this perspective, policymakers' intentional pursuit of their own interests underlies all collective political activity that moves from agenda setting, to formulation, enactment, and implementation" (Heck, 2004, p. 6).

While agenda setting can be seen as the logical first point of the policy process, it requires a more complex framework outside of traditional political actors to highlight the distinctive factors which place an item on a government's agenda. Hill (2009) highlights this problem as he contends that it is difficult to see the agenda setting process along the lines of a stages model. The influence of the public (particularly in the form of the media) undoubtedly affects the process by which an issue comes on to the agenda. Moreover, by also highlighting the need to consider values, ideology, and political culture (Considne, 1994) we see the need to look beyond traditional policy analysis. Thus, as Soroka (2007) claims, "In the agenda-setting literature, it is not regarded as a stage in

policy development. It is more accurately viewed as a critical, ongoing part of the entire policy-making process" (p. 186).

Critical approaches to policy analysis and agenda setting seek to include factors which go beyond the traditional confines of policy studies which are limited to the actions of political actors. These models emphasize the social, economic, and cultural features of political society which underpin the nature of policy development. Hence, a critical agenda-setting model which seeks to understand the discourse of the policy community at large, must look not only at the actions and decisions of policymakers, but also at the public (including the media) and how issues are negotiated, defined, and perceived by those outside of government.

According to Pal (1992) the agenda setting process is influenced by deeply rooted structural conditions which are rooted in a nation's history, politics, and economics. Thus, every policy community is influenced by characteristics which transcend the current preoccupations of policy actors. Levin (2000) draws attentions to the importance of providing a historical and cultural perspective to a given issue as:

> Educational reform is political work, and political work can only be understood appropriately in a historical and cultural perspective. Reforms necessarily arise in particular social, economic, political, and institutional contexts. The way any reform program is conceptualized, developed, defended (and attacked), and implemented will owe a great deal to previous events and practices. (p. 5)

These distinctive features, which are the subject of agenda setting, appear in both public and private discourses. Different frames are held by different policy actors, resulting on a process which is constantly dynamic, subjective, complex, and iterative (Howlett &

Ramesh, 2003). In this form, agenda setting is able to provide a measure of salience and also an explanation towards understanding the rise and fall of an issue over time.

According to Soroka (2007), "Agenda-setting work suggests that attention, and thus capacity for policy change, is limited, and therefore the formation of policy agendas is a critical area of study" (p. 203). Agenda setting as model for analyzing the salience of charter school debates in Canada is useful as items which are pushed onto governmental agendas hold the capacity for spark educational change and reform. However, while agenda setting may be viewed as a stage in the policy process, a framework which includes and understand the complex nature of agenda setting—involving various actors at various levels—is necessary to fully understanding how an issues rises, and falls, from the agenda.

Agenda Setting Research

Agenda setting is often referred to as the first point in the policy cycle, attempting to discern how issues come to be issues, or non-issues, in public policy (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Kingdon, 1995; Soroka, 2007). An agenda may be defined as a list of issues which are recognized as a public problem and appear to warrant action, or inaction, by policymakers. For Kingdon (1995), "The *agenda*...is the list of subjects or problems to which government officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time" (p. 3). Only after a government acknowledges the existence of a public problem do policymakers need to decide on a course of action or inaction (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). The process of agenda setting is perpetually competitive, with proponents of a particular issue seeking to

gain the attention of the media, the public, and policymakers. Therefore, the agenda setting process is typically composed of the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda. In this respect, "Agenda-setting work thus serves both academic and pragmatic purposes: it tests political science hypotheses but also provides sensible explanations of how issues rise and fall and how politics functions in society" (Soroka, 2002a, p. 119).

Agenda setting is concerned with the study of issue salience and therefore issues are typically analyzed with respect to salience. Salience may be described as the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important. Research on the agenda setting process suggests that the relative salience of an issue on the media agenda determines how the public agenda is formed, which in turn influences which issues policymakers consider (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 8). Additionally, issue salience is the relative importance of an issue on the public agenda, as well as the rise and fall of an issue over time as a policy problem. Moreover, "As a literature, its more ambitious purpose is to track public issues and trace processes of political communication and policy development" (Soroka, 2007, p. 185). For example, in the media, "When an issue is in a period of heightened salience, it seems likely that all newspapers will react. When the issue is not especially salient, on the other hand, newspapers may be more likely to react differently on that issue" (Sorkoka, 2002a, p. 42). The media agenda is thus typically examined in an agenda setting study, as both policymakers and the public tend to react to issues determined salient by the media.

The media agenda refers to the role of the mass media, in various forms, and its ability to influence what the public and policymakers believe to be important issues.

Hence, most agenda setting studies have focused on the perceived effects of the media agendas on the agendas of the public and decision makers (Brosius & Wiemann, 1996). As such, the media are often portrayed as powerful agenda setters, and clearly do affect public opinion (Kingdon, 1995, Soroka, 2002b). The media also subsequently influence the understanding and perspective of a certain issue by the public. What issues are covered by the news, which issues are ignored, and which issues are given relative prominence all affect people's view of a particular issue (McCombs & Estranda, 1997). This has an important effect on policy agendas and subsequently policy outcomes, as policymakers are limited in the number of issues that they deal with at any given time. Finally, rather than originating a policy issue, media may also magnify an issue or movement that started elsewhere. Although the effects of media on policy agendas appears to be relatively weak in some research (Kingdon, 1995), while considerably more powerful in others (McCombs & Estrada, 1997), media acts as a communicator between actors in the policy community. As Valenzuela and McCombs (2009) summarize:

> The mass media focus attention on a few key priorities, those that are deemed newsworthy. Over time, those aspects of public affairs that are prominent in the media usually become prominent in public opinion, that is, the media's priorities often become the priorities of the public and policymakers; hence, the concept of setting agendas through the media, agenda setting. (p. 90)

Overall, the media's precise role in political agenda setting remains ambiguous, and what evidence is available remains mixed. Some scholars claim that the media do matter, while others consider the mass media to be largely irrelevant to the political agenda setting process and the policy process at large. Studies of media effects largely

concentrate on newspaper articles, which still appear to exert more influence on agenda setting than television (Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008; Soroka, 2002b). Agenda setting research primarily seeks to establish links between the relative salience of issues in the media with respect to the relative salience of issues of the public agenda and the concerns of public opinion. Thus, the focus of agenda setting research typically remains on issue salience, attempting to identify and find discernable trends over time for a specific issue (Soroka, 2002ab).

The public agenda is a collective measure of what the general public determines to be a particular concern, problem, or issue at a given time; it is effectively synonymous with public opinion. The public agenda, which is the relative focus of the public's attention, is commonly addressed by public opinion polls which ask some variation of "What is the most important problem right now" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Estranda, 1997). Public agenda studies are thus typically conducted hierarchically, analyzing several or all prominent issues at a given time, or longitudinally, where a specific issue is analyzed over time to find salient trends (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The literature concerning the role of the mass media in determining the political agenda is dominated by studies from the U.S. (Walgrave et al., 2008). Beginning with the 1968 Chapel Hill study, most analyses concerning the policy agenda in relation to the media have concentrated on parliamentary/congressional debates, government spending, committees, and statements by policymakers. In Canada, the Question Period during parliamentary debates remains an indicator of short-term changes in issue salience (Soroka, 2002a).

Measures of public opinion are also influential in determining what issues reach the agenda setting level. Although more difficult to measure at times, public opinion constitutes an important component of agenda setting, and the policy process at large. Indeed, "the responsiveness of government policy to citizens' preferences is a central concern in normative democratic theory" (Page & Shapiro, 1983, p. 175). Public opinion can have positive or negative effects (Kingdon, 1995). Positive effects describe the ability of public opinion to push issues onto the agenda and prompt government action, as politicians seek to respond to voting constituents. Negative public opinion effects on the other hand are constraints placed against government action, and are typically more noticeable: "Public opinion may sometimes direct government *to* do something, but it more often constrains government *from* doing something" (Kingdon, 1995, p. 65). Nevertheless, public opinion is generally held to influence the policy debate in an indirect and very general manner.

Issue Attention

The focus on issue salience as a means to determine relative trends is useful because policy issues tend to rise and fall in and out of favour. Because of this cycle, agendas tend to change over time, with certain issues gaining more prominence over others at any given period. As Kingdon (1995) describes:

> Problems not only rise on governmental agendas, but they also fade from view. Why do they fade? First, government may address the problem, or fail to address it. In both cases, attention turns to something else, either because something has been done or because people are frustrated by failure and refuse to invest more of their time in a losing cause. Second, conditions that highlighted a problem may

> change—indicators drop instead of rise, or crises go away. Third, people may become accustomed to a condition or relabel a problem. Fourth, other items emerge and push the highly placed items aside. Finally, there may simply be inevitable cycles in attention; high growth rates level off, and fads come and go. (p. 198)

The change in issue attention and media coverage is known as the "issue attention cycle." How issues gain prominence in the agenda setting process and subsequently disappear remains more difficult to determine.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) summarize a five-stage model typical of the issue attention cycle. Firstly, at a pre-problem stage, an issue exists, but has not been readily identified or captured the public's attention. At some point it reaches the discovery stage, where an event typically creates public alarm over the issue and enthusiasm about how to solve it. However, the public and policymakers then begin to discover the cost of solving the problem, which typically garners inaction. The issue then begins to decline in public interest, largely due to high cost and extensive media coverage. Finally, at the post-problem stage, the issue drops from the public agenda; however, there remain policies, programs, and organizations formed to cope with the issue. Similarly, for Kingdon (1995), extensively promoting a certain issue takes considerable resources and the failure to solve or even address a problem may result in its demise as a prominent agenda item. Therefore,

> It takes time, effort, mobilization of many actors, and the expenditure of political resources to keep an item prominent on the agenda. If it appears, even after a short time, that the subject will not result in legislation or another form of authoritative decision, participants quickly cease to invest in it. (p. 104)

Thus, policy windows open infrequently, and typically do not stay open for long periods of time.

Problem Recognition and Definition

As outlined earlier in the literature review, the education community continues to be enormously divided on the issues of school choice and charter schools. Organized interest groups and policy entrepreneurs on both sides have pushed their particular agendas, with school choice emerging as a visible issue, at least in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. That an issue is perceived as a political problem by policymakers is extremely important, as Kingdon (1995) asserts:

> Problem recognition is critical to agenda setting. The chance of a given proposal or subject rising on an agenda are markedly enhanced if it is connected to an important problem. Some problems are seen as so pressing that they set agendas all by themselves. Once a particular problem is defined as pressing, whole classes of approaches are favored over others, and some alternatives are highlighted while others fall from view. So policy entrepreneurs invest considerable resources bringing their conception of problems to officials' attention, and trying to convince them to see problems their way. The recognition and definition of problems affects outcomes significantly. (p. 198)

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. This ascribed role to the media as gatekeepers exerts a powerful influence, as both the public and policymakers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story, how long the issue lasts in prominence, and its journalistic

position. McCombs and Estranda (1997) describe this as "the picture in our heads" and by influencing the agenda attribute, the media can frame an issue in a manner which may significantly influence the outcome of that issue in the future.

Research Design

The purpose of this research is to determine the relative salience of the issue of charter schools in Canada, specifically in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. As outlined in the literature review, all three provinces have appeared to have taken significant steps towards increasing school choice, while Alberta has had charter schools since 1994. Soroka (1999) asserts that agenda setting has clearly helped to illustrate and explain the policy process, while agendas and agenda change have proven to be useful tools to policy analysts. This analysis owes largely to agenda setting designs utilized by Henig (2008) and Soroka (2002a, 2002b).

Henig (2008) highlights the charter school debate as it appears in newspapers in the United States. There, charter schools have received acceptance in most states and have become an issue of national debate, culminating with front page status in *The New York Times* in August 2004. Using data from prominent national newspapers in the United States, Henig analyzes the role of newspapers in providing the public an accurate view of the research concerning charter schools to date. However, the number of articles, as well as the time at which the articles were published provides an indicator of issue salience. Using Henig's framework, 8 Canadian newspapers were selected from three provinces which have dealt with the issue of school choice and charter schools in the past two decades.

Soroka (2002a, 2002b) encourages the use of an expanded agenda setting model in the Canadian context, which incorporates data from the news media, public opinion, and political debate. Indeed, most models of agenda setting consist of three components; the media, the public, and the policy agenda at a given time (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). However, his analysis provides a specifically Canadian approach to collecting and disseminating agenda data.

Methodology

To determine issue salience concerning charter schools this study used 3 separate measures which included the news media, policy debates, and public opinion.

News Media

Agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. Typical agenda studies focus solely on the number of appearances, in the title and/or the content of the story in order to determine media salience. Hence,

> The media agenda is usually indexed by a content analysis of the news media to determine the number of news stories about an issue or issues of study...The *number* of news stories measures the relative salience of an issue of study on the media agenda. (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 18)

Using a title search is typically sufficient as a content search yields an extremely high number of results, many of which are unrelated to the study (Soroka, 2002a).

Using the newspaper media, data were collected from 8 major Canadian newspapers over a period of approximately 17 years. Newspapers were chosen by region, with 2 newspapers from the province of Alberta, 3 from British Columbia, and 3 from Ontario. The newspapers were selected due to relevance to the three provinces highlighted

during this study, as well as their availability of extensive articles throughout the time period. Moreover, the articles represented a significant proportion of the newspaper media in each province. Searches were also employed using the same database for other terms. Additionally, the *New York Times* database on ProQuest was also searched.

Policy Debates

Debate in the legislature is the best single measure of the policy agenda in Canada (Soroka, 2002b). Moreover, the Debates of the House of Commons (Hansard) have informed several agenda setting studies in Canada (Soroka, 2002a). With respect to salience, using the search engines available from each province's Hansard database, debates which mentioned the term "charter school(s)" were collected from 1993-2010. Debates were selected so long as they included at least one mention of charter school(s) during discussion.

Public Opinion

The measurement of issue salience for the public agenda is most often based on the "Most Important Problem Facing Canadians" (MIP) question (Soroka, 2002a). As an open-ended question, it is useful because it does not bias the response, and has consistently been asked in public opinion polls, allowing for longitudinal analysis. The public agenda is premised "on the belief that the MIP question provides a reasonable measure of issue salience—certainly as good a measure as can be expected from one question, and likely the only measure available over a reasonable time period" (p. 47). Additional longitudinal public opinion data were collected from a 1987-2006 nationwide poll which collected responses to the question of whether or not the federal government is spending enough on education. As primary data concerning public opinion polls

discussing charter schools were not obtained, a variety of secondary sources discussing public confidence and satisfaction in Canadian education were also included.

Data Collection

For each measure of salience, data were collected separately. Articles for the news media were found through a ProQuest database search. Policy debates were located through a search of each provincial Hansard database. Public opinion was gathered through a combination of primary and secondary sources.

News Media

Using the ProQuest database, a search was conducted for titles and abstracts/citations of articles for the term "charter school(s)" in the Canadian Newsstand database. The search yielded 960 articles for the period 1993 to December 1, 2010. From this list, articles from 8 major newspapers from three provinces were collected. The newspapers from Alberta included the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*; from British Columbia, *The Province*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Times Colonist*; and from Ontario, the *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and the *Globe and Mail*. A total of 759 newspaper articles were found from these 8 newspapers which contained the keyword "charter school(s)" in the articles' title of abstract.

Policy Debates

A search of the Hansard Databases for Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario was conducted for the term "charter school(s)." The search included all content in any given debate which mentioned the term "charter school(s)" on at least one occasion. The searches yielded a total of 230 separate debate dates: 160 for Alberta, 29 for B.C., and 49 for Ontario.

Public Opinion

A search of the Queen's University School of Policy Studies website which contained data sets from the Canadian Opinion Research Archive (CORA) yielded results for the Gallup Poll question "What is the Most Important Problem Facing Canadians today?" for the years 1993-2006. The percentage of respondents for "Education Issues" was taken from each quarter. Initial data were obtained for all years with the exception of 1996 Q3 and for all of 2002. In addition, a report from Gregg, Kelly, Sullivan, & Woolstencroft: The Strategic Counsel (2009) provided data for the "What is the Most Important Problem Facing Canadians today?" question for the years 2007-2009. Results from this poll were included to provide results for the years 2007-2009. Results for these years were provided in rounded figures. The same CORA archive was also used to obtain results from a support for federal government spending poll related to education, conducted by Environics. Results from this poll were obtained from 1987-2006. Because of difficulties in obtaining consistent longitudinal public surveys in Canada (Soroka, 2002a), other secondary sources of public opinion data concerning education in Canada were obtained from several sources, including: Guppy and Davies, 1999; Harris Decima, 2009; Levin, 2009; Mazzuca, 2003; and Taylor, 2001.

Data Analysis

The news media, policy debates, and public opinion were all analyzed to highlight periods of heightened issue salience and to identify discernable trends over time. For each province, the issue of charter schools was discussed based on when the issue appeared most salient on the agenda.

News Media

Newspaper articles were collected and sorted by number of articles per year. This collection provided a measure of issue salience, given the number of articles per year. Data were separated by province to highlight salience within each province over time. Discernable trends were identified and discussed, along with connections made with the policy debate.

Policy Debates

Legislative debates were also collected and sorted by number of articles per year. This collection provided a measure of issue salience, given the number of articles per year. Data were separated by province to highlight salience within each province over time. Discernable trends were identified and discussed, along with connections made with the news media.

Public Opinion

Public opinion data were collected in the form of the answer of "education issues" to the "most important problem facing Canadians today." The Gallup Poll question was sorted by quarter. A second source of longitudinal public opinion data which were collected from responses to "Federal Government Spending on Education" was presented by year, 1987-2006. Secondary sources pertaining to public opinion were included and discussed along with the primary sources. A conclusion summarizes the main results concerning public opinion.

Assumptions and Limitations

The ProQuest searches located newspaper articles which only had the terms "charter school(s)" in the title or the abstract. Thus, articles may have been neglected

which used the term in the content at some point. However, according to Soroka (2002a) these may be assumed to be extraneous and small variables. Nevertheless, articles may only mention the keywords in passing, and the breadth of the article does not concentrate fully on the defined term. Given that this happens within the searches conducted in all years and all newspapers, it only affects the total number of articles, which are not counted as a whole for the media agenda. Additionally, Henig (2008) indicates that educational issues are not typically the focus of the media agenda. The overall number of results therefore is not a strong indicator of the relative salience of the issue of charter schools compared to other public issues or educational issues broadly. Finally, the newspapers chosen may commit a degree of bias towards or against the issue of charter schools in comparison to other newspapers not included in the study.

Legislative debates concerning a specific issue are not a full indicator of how policymakers view a certain issue and how it receives attention through the policy process. According to Soroka (2002b), the majority of important policy discussion takes place "unrecorded behind closed doors" (pp. 271-72). Other relevant measures such as policy and position papers, committee meetings, and regulations are not included as measures of salience here. Additionally, debates were solely sorted by year, based only on debates mentioning charter schools at least once. The depth and scope of each debate was not included, hence some debates may have had a strong focus on charter schools, while others only mentioned them in passing.

There are no specific surveys concerning charter schools and public opinion in Canada. Data from the "most important problem" question has a response only for "educational issues" which could broadly incorporate many problems in education not

relevant to charter schools. Similarly, the question of should the federal government spend more on education does not fully reflect the issue of charter schools or issues specific to Alberta, British Columbia, or Ontario.

Restatement of the Area of Study

The main purpose of this study was to determine issue salience for charter schools in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. This was achieved using an expanded agenda setting framework, which examined data concerning the news media and policy debates, within each province, as well as public opinion throughout Canada, specifically during the period 1993-2010. Following this, results for each province and the policy debates which occurred in each province during periods of heightened salience are discussed. Connection of results to Canadian political culture and educational policy are extended in chapter 5.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This section presents results of the data collection outlined in chapter 4. Results from the media, policy, and public agendas are followed by a detailed analysis and discussion of issue salience concerning charter schools in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, respectively. A conclusion summarizes the main themes, while connection of results to larger policy dynamics in Canada is discussed in chapter 5.

The Media Agenda

The study analysed media agenda through a search of Canadian newspapers (since 1993) that have some of the largest circulation levels in three provinces. As shown in Table 1, the newspapers have a combined national daily circulation average of over 1 million copies. According to the Canadian Newspaper Association (2009), Canada's average daily paid circulation stood at 4.1 million copies in 2009; therefore, the eight newspapers used in this study represent approximately 34% of all newspapers circulated daily in Canada. Thus, as an indicator of media salience, the sample newspapers represent a large readership not only in each province, but in Canada as a whole. A title and abstract search was done for articles in the sample newspapers containing the term "charter school(s)." The total number of articles in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario per year is shown in Table 2.

Overall, all three provinces show a discernable negative trend in reporting articles concerning charter schools in recent years. Particularly pronounced is the large decrease in reporting of charter schools after the year 2000. Indeed, the period 1993-2000 contained 68% of the total charter school articles for Alberta, 77% in British Columbia, and 79% in Ontario.

Table 1

Daily Newspaper Circulation Rates in Canada (2009)

Title	Prov.	Publisher	Mon- Fri	Saturday	Sunday	Weekly total	Avg./ day
Calgary Herald	AB	CanWest MediaWorks	126,129	122,718	118,884	872,247	124,607
The Edmonton Journal	AB	CanWest MediaWorks	118,944	120,432	115,194	830,343	118,620
The Province	BC	CanWest MediaWorks	158,916	N/A	182,008	976,588	162,765
The Vancouver Sun	BC	CanWest MediaWorks	168,616	210,356	N/A	1,053,434	175,572
Times Colonist	BC	CanWest MediaWorks	65,464	64,034	63,055	454,408	64,915
Toronto Star	ON	Torstar	286,303	460,709	317,602	2,199,214	314,173
The Globe and Mail	ON	CTVglobemedia Inc	303,043	303,043	376,417	1,891,629	315,272
Ottawa Citizen	ON	CanWest MediaWorks	125,211	124,113	116,824	866,989	123,856

Table 2

Number of Newspaper Articles Containing "Charter School(s)" (1993-2010)

Year	Alberta	British Columbia	Ontario
1993	1	0	2
1994	88	5	10
1995	54	35	10
1996	49	7	18
1997	44	3	11
1998	83	1	16
1999	30	5	16
2000	38	2	6
2001	14	1	6
2002	33	3	1
2003	21	3	2
2004	19	1	4
2005	21	2	1
2006	13	1	0
2007	19	1	3
2008	19	1	3
2009	16	3	1
2010	9	1	3
Total	N=571	N=75	N=113

The prominence of charter school articles in newspapers was notable during different periods. Alberta was the first province to have a salient number of charter school articles in 1994, which can be attributed to the fact that charter school legislation was passed during that year. In British Columbia, 1995 contained the largest number of charter school articles by far, with 49% of the total articles during that year alone. However, since 1995, charter schools have been largely ignored by the media. In Ontario, the most discernable salient period was for the years 1996-1999. During that period, 54% of the total charter school articles appeared.

Three general conclusions may be reached from the media agenda concerning charter schools. Firstly, that charter school coverage by the media was much more prominent during the mid-late 1990s. Since that time, charter school reporting has progressively decreased, especially outside Alberta. Even in Alberta, however, charter school reporting has gone down, and although there still remains some discussion of charter schools in the province, the last year (2010) analyzed contained the least amount of articles since 1993. Secondly, charter schools were being discussed by the media at different times in different provinces. In Alberta they enjoyed a high degree of prominence from 1994-1998, with 56% of all articles during that period. In B.C., 1995 contained almost half of the total articles in the province, and has since then largely been ignored by the media. In Ontario, charter schools remained salient throughout the late 1990s, but have since dropped off. Specific events inside of each province appeared to have influence over media reporting on charter schools. Finally, as of 2010 in all provinces, charter schools do not appear to be a particularly salient issue according to the media agenda.

The Policy Agenda

A search of Hansard databases for the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario yielded a total of 230 debates which contained the keyword "charter school(s)". Results from the policy agenda are similar to those in the media agenda. The results of the policy agenda are shown in Table 3.

The Alberta legislature mentioned charter schools most often, with Ontario second and B.C. third. These results are similar as found in the media agenda, with Alberta having substantially more debates than the other provinces. This is again likely a result of charter schools only existing in Alberta. Similarly, as with newspaper articles, Ontario also held more debates with respect to charter schools than British Columbia.

Overall, results from the policy agenda indicate several trends over time, as well as several correlations with the media agenda. In all three provinces, the policy debates were largely concentrated during the 1990s, a trend also found in the media agenda. Debates in Alberta reached their peak in 1994, likely because of charter school legislation. Since that time they have steadily decreased. Indeed, 1994-2000 debates accounted for 60% of the total debates in Alberta. This concentration in the mid-late 1990s was visible in the media agenda described above as well.

In B.C., 1995 contained approximately 55% of all policy debates concerning charter schools, while the period covering 1994-2000 contained 77% of all articles. The lack of discussion by both the media and policymakers highlights the assumption that charter schools are not a visible issue in B.C., particularly over the past decade. In Ontario the data are not as clear as the other provinces. However, the general trend

towards increased salience in the mid-late 1990s remains the same. In 1997, there contained more debates (18) which mentioned charter schools than there were newspaper articles (11). Thus, again, 1997 was perhaps the most interesting year to examine salience on Ontario, while there was a positive correlation generally from 1995-1999 in the media agenda's discussion of charter schools and discussions in Hansard.

The Public Agenda

The public agenda contains two primary sources of public opinion which provide longitudinal indicators of public opinion concerning education in Canada. Additional secondary sources of public opinion are added. A conclusion highlights the main themes from the public agenda.

Most Important Problem

Determining salient trends in the public agenda remains the most difficult of the three separate agenda setting measures used in this analysis. Longitudinal public opinion data could not be found with specific regard to charter schools. However, using the "Most Important Problem Facing Canadians" (MIP) question, we may view a general trend over time. Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents to the question by quarter until 2006, and bi-annually from 2007-2009.

Beginning in 1993, there had been an incremental increase in respondents viewing education as the most important issue facing Canadians. However, results from this poll have also not been extremely stratified in any given year, with the lowest year (1994) showing just 0.675% of respondents and the highest year (2000) with 3.275% of respondents, a difference of 2.6%.

Table 3

Hansard Debates Containing "Charter Schools(s)" (1993-2010)

Year	Alberta	British Columbia	Ontario
1993	0	0	0
1994	26	2	0
1995	11	12	0
1996	7	0	4
1997	16	0	18
1998	17	2	10
1999	11	1	3
2000	8	0	7
2001	8	1	5
2002	9	0	1
2003	5	0	1
2004	4	0	0
2005	5	1	0
2006	7	0	0
2007	2	3	0
2008	7	0	0
2009	9	0	0
2010	7	0	0
Total	N=159	N=22	N=49

With a mean of about 2.0%, education does not appear to have been a significant issue throughout any calendar year since 1993. In any given quarter, there has yet to be more than 5% of respondents citing educational issues as the most important issue amongst Canadians. Again, although public opinion has increasingly viewed education as an important issue, the difference over time has been minimal (e.g., if compared to other perennial, and typically more salient issues such as the economy or healthcare). Since 1993 there has been general increase in respondents until peaking at 4.9% in the year 2000 where it began to decrease, until again reaching a peak of 4.9% of respondents in 2003. Since that time, the number of respondents has fluctuated, generally between 1% to 3% of total respondents. (Figure 1 illustrates the MIP data over time.)

In relation to the media and policy agenda, it remains difficult to correlate any evident similarities over the period. During the mid-late 1990s when charter schools were most salient among all the provinces, public opinion towards education as the MIP was also on the rise. However, MIP for education did not peak until the year 2000, and then did so again in 2003, a time when both the media and policy agendas concerning charter schools were already in decline in all three provinces. Additionally, Gregg et al. (2009) found no significant difference among identifiable regions (less than 1% between regions) for the MIP concerning education.

Federal Spending on Education

A second source of longitudinal public opinion data concerning education in Canada was found from an annual poll concerning federal government spending on education which asked: "Keeping in mind that increasing services could increase taxes,

do you think the federal government is spending too much, just the right amount, or should be spending more on Education?" Although data from this poll were only acquired until 2006, Figure 2 illustrates the perception that Canadians increasingly believe that education spending should increase. Since 1987, when respondents to the question were generally equal at close to 50%, Canadians have increasingly held the perception that the federal government should spend more on education. This may imply a decreased overall satisfaction with current public education, or may indicate a general perception that education is more important now than in the past, which is slightly similar to results from the MIP above. Again, however, these questions do not examine charter schools specifically, making it difficult to analyze with respect to the media and policy agendas over the same period.

Canadian Satisfaction With Education

Many parents seek charter schools because of a perceived dissatisfaction with public schools (Bosetti et al., 1998). The movement towards school choice and charter schools appears to be rooted in a "perceived crisis in education" (Bosetti et al., 2000 Brigham et al., 2004; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1997). As Stein (2001) asserts, "This public dissatisfaction is a stunning reversal from a decade ago, when Canadians were generally satisfied with health care and education" (p. 89). As Levin and Young (1997) discuss, the 1990s appeared to be a period of increased discord in education, finding that while there has always been some unhappiness with public schools, in recent years' reform agendas have become more focused on issues of individual outcomes, rather than equity and community values.

Table 4

Percentage of Respondents Citing "Educational Issues" as the MIP Facing Canadians (1993-2009)

	Time period						
Year	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	January	July	Yearly avg. (%)
1993	–	–	–	0.8			0.8
1994	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.6			0.675
1995	0.9	1.0	0.7	0.6			0.8
1996	0.5	0.7	–	1.2			0.8
1997	1.5	2.3	2.2	2.1			2.025
1998	1.8	1.8	2.0	1.8			1.85
1999	2.0	2.0	3.1	2.0			2.275
2000	3.0	2.7	4.9	2.5			3.275
2001	3.5	2.6	1.9	2.4			2.6
2002	–	–	–	–			–
2003	2.2	2.3	4.9	2.6			3.25
2004	2.3	3	3.1	2.1			2.625
2005	3.4	1.7	2.4	1.4			2.225
2006	2.3	1.8	2.6	1.3			2.0
2007					3.0	3.0	3.0
2008					2.0	1.0	1.5
2009					1.0	2.0	1.5

Note. Figures/values for 2007-2009 were gathered from different sources than years 1993-2006. See discussion in chapter 3 re: methodology.

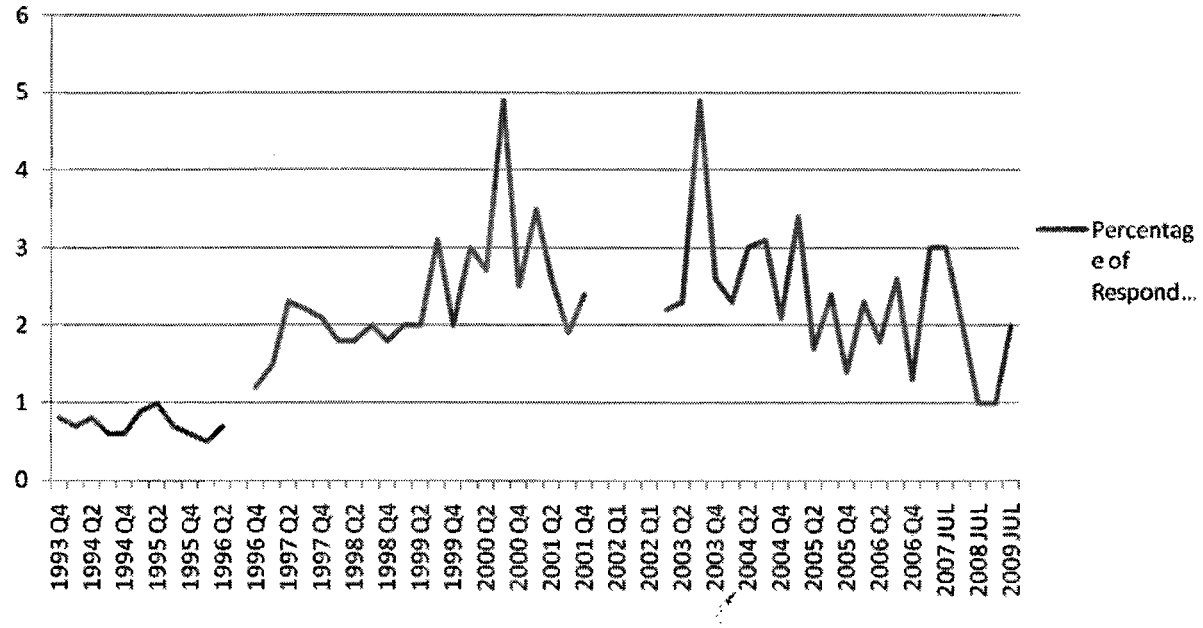

Figure 1. Respondents citing "educational issues" as the MIP facing Canadians (1993-2009).

Note. Data not available for all periods.

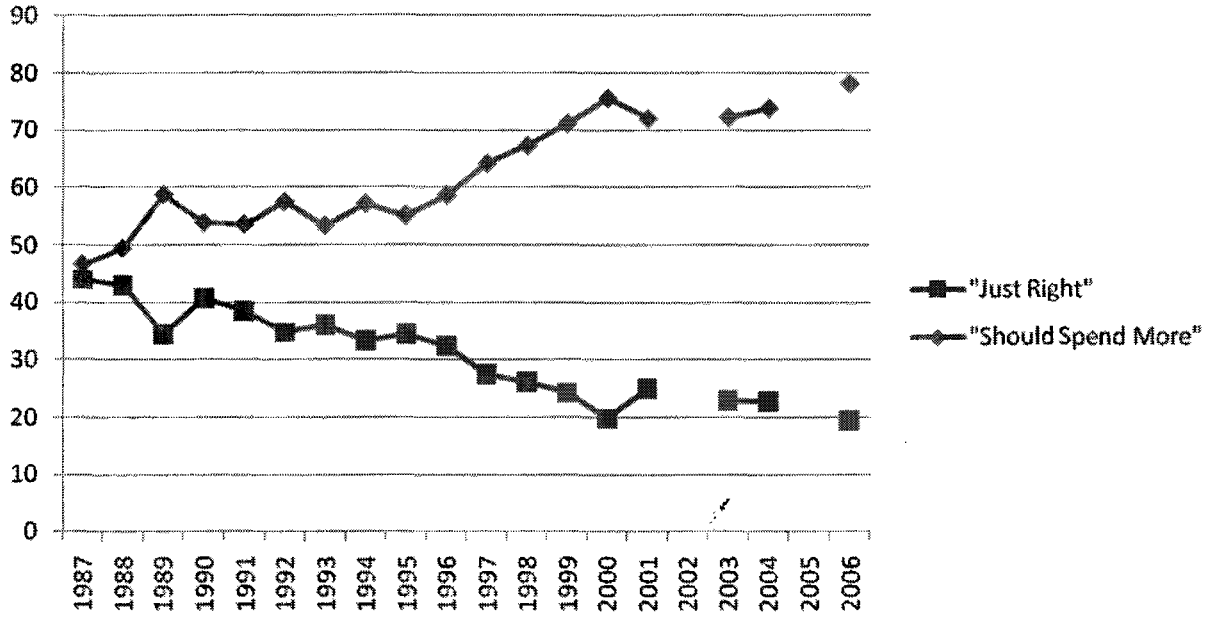

Figure 2. Federal government spending: Education (1987-2006).

Note. Data not available for 2002 and 2005.

According to Taylor (2001), during the period of charter school legislation in Alberta, there appeared to have been a growing negative perception towards the state of education and to cut-backs to schools. In a Calgary Angus Reid poll in 1995, 67% of respondents saw the impact of changes to education negatively, while only 7% of respondents saw city schools as better than a year before (p. 81). A 2003 Gallup Poll (as cited in Mazzuca, 2003) found that 61% of Canadians were either "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with public education, in contrast to 42% of similar respondents from the U.S. More recently, Levin (2009) asserts that Canadian public confidence in education remains relatively high, particularly in relation to other public institutions. In contrast, Guppy and Davies (1999) concluded that public confidence in education was declining, which they interpreted as an indication that Canadians view schooling as increasingly important.

A Harris Decima poll (2009) suggests that "almost half" of Canadians remain unsatisfied with the education system with preparing students with the skills that they need in the modern economy. Support for education was actually lowest in Alberta, where the majority did not believe that the education system was doing an adequate job preparing students for work. In 1998/1999 5.6% of all children in Canadian elementary and secondary schools were enrolled in private schools, up from 4.6% in 1987/1988. However, comparisons among provinces are nevertheless problematic because of different funding structures which determine which schools qualify for public funding. In Ontario specifically, polls conducted by OISE indicate that public opinion concerning Ontario schools have markedly improved since the years of discord in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Hart & Livingstone, 2009).

Summary of the Public Agenda

As a measure of salience for the charter school issue, public opinion remains much more ambiguous than news reporting and policy debates, which focus on charter schools specifically rather than education broadly. It would appear, generally, that Canadians continue to support public schools and have remained just as, if not more so, concerned with educational matters over the past two decades.

Whether public opinion concerning educational matters may act as an impetus for the formation of charter schools is also difficult to determine. Based on the debates occurring during the periods of increased salience in each province, it appeared that charter schools were being pushed onto the agenda by policymakers or other stakeholders who supported the idea, rather than a more "bottom-up" movement by the public. In Alberta for example, Raham (1998) noted that there did not appear to be any parent groups or organizations pushing for Alberta's charter schools. Taylor (2001) similarly notes the extremely prominent role of business groups in the consultation process. The charter schools issue then does not appear to have significantly influenced by public opinion in Canada over the past two decades.

Issue Salience

Results and discussion of issue salience are organized by province; with Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario presented, respectively.

Charter School Issue Salience in Alberta

Alberta had the highest number of charter school articles in 1994 with 88 articles. During 1994 charter schools were a visible issue due to impending, and subsequent, legislation for the schools in Alberta. In comparison to the media agenda,

trends in the policy agenda yielded similar results. The strongest correlation appears in 1994 where charter schools were mentioned most frequently on both agendas. Additionally, since the late 1990s, there has also been a steady downward trend in the salience of charter schools in the policy agenda. (Figures 3 and 4 illustrate this trend.) The media and policy agendas thus show several correlations, with a similar negative trend concerning the salience of charter schools in Alberta. The year 1994 was the most visible year for the charter school debate, with 15% of all media articles and 16% of all policy debates.

Discord and debate in Alberta. After the reelection of the Progressive Conservative government under new leader Ralph Klein in 1993, a series of changes in education were immediately announced. However, charter schools did not appear as a policy issue in Alberta until early 1994, noted by the dramatic increase in salience by both the media and policy agendas. The issue appears to have arisen quite quickly, no doubt due to the educational reforms which included charter schools and subsequent legislation of such schools during that same year. Charter schools were placed within the series of educational reforms included in the School Amendment Act (Bill 19) which was formally announced by Premier Ralph Klein (Progressive Conservative) on January 17, 1994. From January of 1994 until May of 1994, members of the legislature continued to address the implications of Bill 19. Debates in the legislature appeared very critical towards the introduction of charter schools (and indeed of Bill 19 as a whole), with many members of the opposition questioning the rationale for introducing such schools, as well as an unclear status concerning how these schools would be implemented in Alberta.

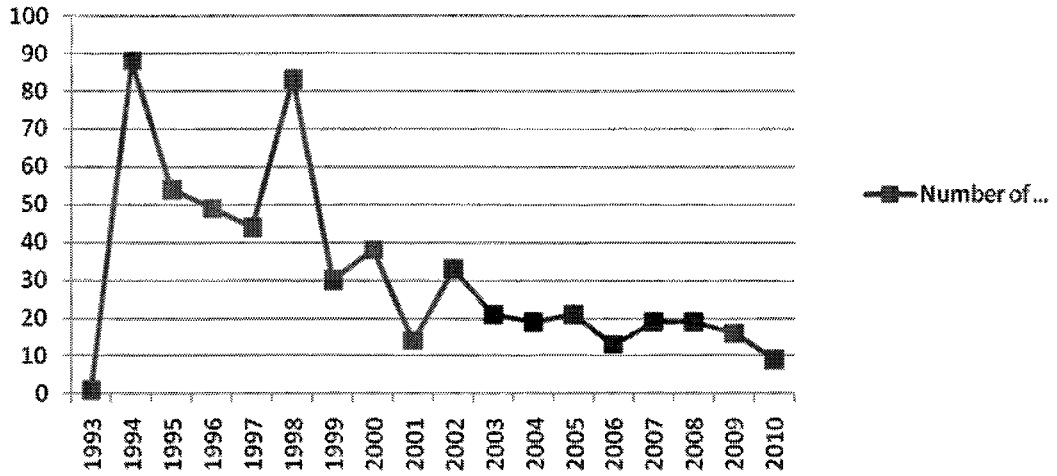

Figure 3. Alberta newspaper articles containing "charter school(s)" (1993-2010).

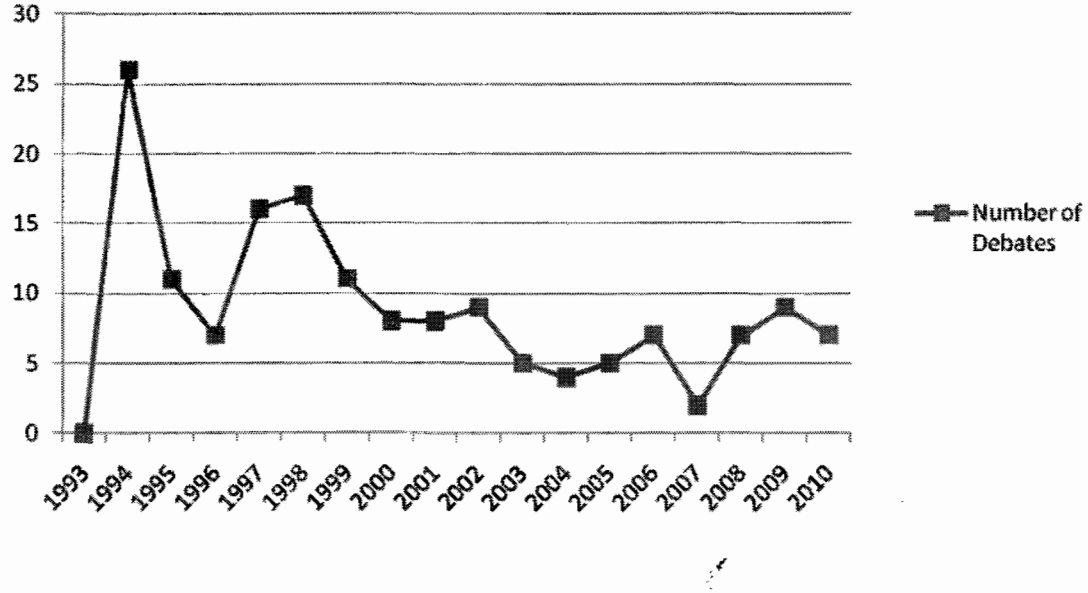

Figure 4. Number of debates containing "charter school(s)" in Alberta (1993-2010).

It would not be until during the throne speech in February 1994 that charter schools were found first mentioned in the legislative debates, when former Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta Gordon Towers described the Progressive Conservative mandate concerning education as follows:

> The government has made progress in reducing the number of government departments, in reducing staff positions through attrition, consolidation, and a severance program, and in seeking to reduce overall employee compensation by 5 percent. Over the next few months the government will take steps to reduce the size and cost of administration in our health and education sectors. It will consolidate both health boards and education boards, change the way education is funded, and create an access fund for advanced education. (Towers, 1994, February 10)

Within this plan for restructuring and amending the School Act, Towers described the main tenants of Bill 19 as:

> The new Act will ensure a free flow of government information while protecting individual privacy. In education, which Albertans have identified as our greatest priority, the government will amend the School Act as follows:
>
> - to establish full provincial funding to ensure students throughout Alberta have equal access to a quality basic education,
> - to reduce the number of school boards and shift decision-making to schools, communities, and parents,
> - to streamline administration to allow for a more direct flow of resources to the classroom,

- to provide for and evaluate a pilot program for chartered schools, and
- to provide education to students in accordance with Canadian constitutional guarantees.

As well, there will be more assessments of students and better reporting to students, parents, and the public. School boards will be asked to prepare three-year business plans and will report publicly on salaries and administrative costs. (Towers, 1994, February 10)

Thus the charter school issue should be viewed within the larger discussion of educational reform occurring in Alberta during the period. They appear to have been included as "part of the package" concerning the broader aspects of reform at the time, rather than as a distinctly separate issue. Indeed, part of Bill 19 was focused on new provincial authority to appoint superintendents, which appeared to incite more debate overall than the charter school issue itself. Yet, the emergence of charter schools within the ideological context of reducing spending in the educational sector supports the perception that charter schools were perhaps supposed to be, or become, a way of cutting costs from the educational budget. As charter schools emerged during this period, they engendered a largely critical response in legislative debates, while also becoming a contestable issue in the media.

Klein confused. Shortly after the Throne Speech, members of the opposition began to criticize the Premier directly concerning charter schools. The concept of charter schools continued to arise, particularly within critical discussions concerning the exact organization, purpose, and definition of what these schools were exactly intended to achieve in Alberta. This first visible opposition stemmed from an incident where Premier

Klein had been asked a question concerning charter schools, and had been unable to discuss them in any detail. This occurred when Duco Van Binsbergen, Liberal, West Yellowhead, was first to call out the Premier concerning the ambiguity of charter schools:

> Charter schools are an important item on the education agenda of this government. Yet a few weeks ago at a public meeting the Premier was asked about charter schools, and amazingly enough he couldn't explain what they were. I'd like to give him another chance to show that he's done his homework, so I'm asking the Premier: can he now explain the meaning of charter schools?
>
> (Van Binsbergen, 1994, February 14)

According to Joan Crockatt (1994) from the *Edmonton Journal*, the legislature was shut down for 5 minutes to restore order after the Premier could not answer the questions concerning charter schools. The debate continued after this point, with several other MLAs accusing Jonson and Klein of attempting to commercialize education, not addressing charter schools during the election campaign, not being able to clearly define what a charter school is, and not consulting with the Alberta Teachers' Association. Similar attacks on Klein and Jonson's perceived ignorance of the issue was a persistent theme throughout the debates in 1994. As Grant Mitchell, Liberal, Edmonton-McClung questioned:

> Mr. Speaker, what confidence can we have in a government that seems to have lost whatever fix it might have thought it had on some sense of what is really going on out there? We have a Premier who's launching this province on fundamental, philosophical, structural changes ideologically driven who can't define what a charter school is. Can you imagine—I'll put this in terms that the

> Conservatives can maybe understand—the president of IBM saying in a major announcement on behalf of his or her company that a new product line they're going to be bringing out—and let's imagine that it's the think pad, and you know what? The first question is: could you please define exactly what that product is? The president couldn't tell you if it was a laptop computer or a desktop computer, couldn't tell you whether it came with a printer or it didn't come with a printer, couldn't define how powerful it was, how much memory it had, could do none of those things. Could you imagine? Of course it would never happen, but the Premier of Alberta with a $15 billion corporation at his disposal can't define what a charter school is. (Mitchell, 1994, February 28)

A few weeks later the same questions and comments continued to be directed at Premier Klein and Minister Jonson. Michael Henry, Liberal, Edmonton-Centre, continued to emphasize that the concept had not been well articulated by the Government, claiming that, "The minister seems as confused about charter schools as the Premier has been" (Henry, 1994, March 15). In response, Premier Klein answered that he wanted to

> literally make every school in this province a community school. We want to create a scenario where the teachers and the principals and the students and the parents are involved in running their schools. We want to reduce the burden of administration and put a more human face on the education system in this province. (Klein, 1994, March 15)

To which Henry replied, "That would prove the Premier doesn't know anything about community schools" (Henry, 1994, March 15). MLA Henry had earlier articulated his

criticism of the lack of direction concerning charter schools being provided by the government:

> In the government's document Meeting the Challenge the government talked about charter schools and contract schools. We've had very little public discussion about charter schools and about contract schools and, frankly, about the concept of magnet schools, that's somewhat related. There is a lot of fear, a lot of anxiety in Alberta right now about charter schools because the government's going ahead with that, and part of that is created because nobody can quite define exactly how these schools will operate. The Minister of Education gives us hints once in a while, but we've not seen draft legislation. We've not seen draft regulations or a draft contract with these charter schools. Depending on how the charter schools operate, it either could be, at one extreme, the death of the public education system as we know it, or at the other extreme it could be the tool that we need to provide innovation within our public education system. We don't know what it's going to be because we don't know how it's going to operate. (Henry, 1994, February 22)

This apparent confusion was also highlighted in the media during this time, as February and March of 1994 mentioned several articles describing Klein's confusion. Moreover, Henry's criticism concerning the lack of public debate and consultation continued to be suggested over the next few months. This event may imply a hidden agenda towards charter schools. However, while Klein should have been able to answer the question, perhaps his interest in charter schools was minimal, particularly if concerned with the larger educational changes placed within the Bill. Indeed, charter schools were proposed

as experimental schools in limited numbers (and remain so today) while being brought into legislation as part of a much large package of educational reform at the time.

Concerns over consultation. While initially challenging the Premier based on his perceived ignorance of charter schools, opposition members continued to reflect a critical stance towards a perceived neglect over having their voices included in the charter school debate. According to Taylor (2001), this ambiguity continued to arise as a result of a consultation process concerning charter schools that was undertaken largely behind closed doors. Many MLAs were also upset that Klein had not included charter schools as part of his election platform, and included in Bill 19 were changes that were occurring extremely fast, without sufficient discussion. Several MLAs revealed discontent with what they perceived as extreme changes being made without adequate consultation. As Van Binsbergen would further question:

> I also submit that the roundtable discussions, the vaunted roundtable discussions, did not at all authorize the government to take these profound measures. ... There was only one person at the two conferences together who favoured the establishment of charter schools, and it seemed that his way finally found its way into the recommendations by the government. (Van Binsbergen, 1994, February 15)
>
> No one, other than one person from Red Deer, advanced the cause of charter schools. Perhaps it is a good idea—who knows?—but let us canvas the Alberta population and see what they think. Thus far they don't know what to think. (Van Binsbergen, 1994, February 23)

These roundtables had begun in autumn of 1993 and continued into 1994. Held by Alberta Education in order to consult with Albertans concerning educational reforms,

these sessions were met with criticism from teachers and educational stakeholders, including several student protests. Resulting from these sessions was *Meeting the Challenge*, a workbook which was also critically received by educators, with the ATA publishing *Challenging the View* after conducting their own alternative roundtables in response to the governments' actions. Bruce, Kneebone, and McKenzie (1997) argue that these roundtables were held more to manufacture consent and gauge the strength of any resistance, rather than as a forum of consultation with various stakeholder groups. The person from Red Deer referred to is Joe Freedman, a former physician who emerged as a vocal proponent for charter schools, and who would propose a 3-year experiment for a charter school in Alberta (Freedman, 1994, March 3).

Criticism thus continued to be developed concerning the lack of focus, direction, and exact purpose over charter schools in Alberta. Opponents claimed to not understand why they were a necessary reform, why they would be placed directly under the auspices of the Minister, and why charter schools were superior to community schools in the province. Jonson defended that these sessions had been held for an extended period and were fairly consistent with the current policy direction in education. However, opposition members charged Jonson with not clarifying the concept to the public. With respect to charter schools, MLA Michael Henry argued:

> Again, I think it's incumbent upon the government to demonstrate clearly where in the consultation these changes were suggested. If these changes were not suggested in a major way in the consultation, then we can only assume that the consultation this government went through was a pure sham and was a PR exercise of the government.

> I think I have to question. I don't want to think this is another agenda, but I wonder if there's another agenda with regard to the charter schools. I think there's a danger—and this is where we're having central control; I think it sends a wrong message—allowing charter schools to bypass their local school jurisdiction and sign a charter essentially with the minister if they can't reach an agreement, as I understand the legislation says. (Henry, 1994, April 12)

Similarly Van Binsbergen again questioned the rationale of moving towards centralized control, specifically with charter schools:

> So I'm not quite sure why it needs to be introduced in this Bill. It could be that a potential charter group of course can bypass—and I don't like that—the local board and go straight to the minister to apply. Again, there is a possibility of private schools sneaking in there and getting public funding. Particularly, of course, when the Treasurer on the open line indicated, as I heard him say, that the end of the monopoly of public education was in sight. There's no number, there's no limits. (Van Binsbergen, 1994, April 12)

Although opponents charged the Conservative government by suggesting that they were attempting to "privatize" education, both in the legislative discussions and in the media, it should be noted that both Klein and Jonson continued to emphasize the pilot or experimental nature of charter schools during this period. At no point did they explicitly state that charter schools would continue to expand significantly (although what number this would be was not initially clear) or that they would radically alter education in the province. Nevertheless, even after charter schools had been legislation, opposition to what was felt as a hegemonic process. Again, Michael Henry spoke out

against what he believed was an essentially undemocratic process which had brought charter schools into the province:

> Mr. Speaker, I'm terribly disappointed that the government has chosen not to provide a more detailed analysis. If the points that the minister raised about charter schools being a response to individuals wanting more choice, then the government could have responded in that way with this question by providing the number of individuals who suggested that they wanted more choice and how many of those actually suggested charter schools. The government's very prescriptive. The government is ignoring the people of Alberta in its consultation, and the people of Alberta have a right to know that the government did not in fact complete an analysis of the consultations but went ahead with their ideologically driven agenda. (Henry, 1994, November 2)

Opposition concerns over how charter schools had been brought unto the government's agenda in Alberta reveal that although the concept of charter schools was not strongly rejected (as occurred in British Columbia and Ontario) there were still concerns over why charter schools should be brought in to supplement public, or private, education in the province.

Last defence. By May 1994, Bill 19 had reached third reading, yet criticisms continued to be levelled against the introduction of charter schools. Opposition members of the legislature remained adamant that the Bill would have negative implications for education in the province, while the charter school issue had been left in a very ambiguous position by the government. In the media, similar disapproval was also apparent, including the Alberta Teachers' Association which pledged to oppose charter

schools ("ATA Pledges to Oppose," 1994). In the final stages of Bill 19 the popular sentiment that charter schools had been introduced exceptionally quickly continued to be invoked in both the media and policy discussions. As Karen Leibovici, Liberal, Edmonton-Meadowlark highlights, charter schools still had not been clearly explained by this time:

> Now, when I talked a little bit about the charter schools and funding following the student, again we have no clear idea. There's no clear indication of when or how that's going to start. We just get bits and pieces, and people in the community have to sit back. It's not only us in the Legislative Assembly that you are doing a disservice to by not having your plans in place, but you're doing a disservice to every Albertan in this province. So what I'd like to close with is the fact that this Bill is ill conceived. This Bill has not been thought out in a rational, reasonable manner. (Leibovici, 1994, May 2)

Similarly, Frank Bruseker, Liberal, Calgary-North West (who would later become president of the ATA), highlighted concerns over the apparent ambiguity over charter schools at the time:

> That's why it's a test? Indeed it's a test, or "pilot" is another term that is applied to it. I guess what I'm saying is that if you're going to have charter schools tell us what you're going to do, tell us how you're going to measure it, tell us how you're going to evaluate it before you begin, rather than simply saying, "Let's do it and see what happens." That's what I'm asking for. I'll leave that as food for thought for the members opposite. (Bruseker, 1994, May 3)

Although Klein and Jonson had continued to endorse charter schools as a pilot or experimental project, they had not consistently described what this would mean. The exact number of acceptable charter schools, application process, and regulations for such schools had still not been established even as Bill 19 was in its final stages.

As had occurred earlier in the year, the media were equally critical of Premier Klein and the implementation of charter schools in the province. Media reports suggests similar concerns already noted, as "It is impossible to believe that these changes can be implemented into our system with so little regard for our views, let alone time enough for complete assessment by well trained individuals to suggest time frames for such drastic modifications" (Taylor, 1994, p. A5). Nevertheless, the main concern of educational stakeholders opposed to implemented charter schools continued to be a perception that the idea had not been well planned out and that Bill 19 require more amendments and time to discuss the implications of the educational reforms, including charter schools. Michael Percy, Liberal, Edmonton-Whitemud summarizes these concerns as:

> The government would have been well advised to allow far more debate on these amendments, because it may have been the case then that the legislative structure of this Bill could have been fleshed out in more detail so that people who do want to take advantage of some of the provisions related to charter schools or home schooling would have far more security in the knowledge that they were dealing with a structure that was in place, had been fully debated, rather than being subject to a high degree of ministerial discretion through regulation. (Percy, 1994, May 17)

The fact that most of charter school provisions were conceived in the form of regulations rather than discussed in legislature (and perhaps public consultation) appeared to result in the confusion and unclear status of charter schools at the time by both policymakers and the media. As a result of this, as Liberal MLA Michael Henry claimed, if charter school legislation must be endorsed it should still be parcelled with provisions which limit their impact:

> Mr. Speaker, the minister can state all he wants. We all know that their minds change from one day to the next. I'd like the minister to commit to bringing in amendments to the charter schools to find the number of pilots and a sunset clause so it forces any future government to come back and re-evaluate before we extend it wholesale. (Henry, 1994, May 5)

Although charter school legislation was passed without any major changes such as those recommended by Henry, to date they have not gone passed their initial pilot project status.

Thus, despite calls from the opposition asking to clarify and clearly define the concept of charter schools, Bill 19 along with charter schools was passed with very few amendments in response to these criticisms. Afterwards, although the issue decreased in salience, charter schools continued to be criticized for their lack of exact purpose in Alberta education as well as the fact that the consultation process appeared to have been dominated by those whose interests fit in with Premier Klein's package for educational reform. Although the past decade has seen charter schools gradually decline as a salient issue in Alberta, they have not been entirely neglected on the media and policy agendas. This points to remaining feelings of discord concerning charter schools, as the initial

complaints concerning the role, place, and purpose of charters in Alberta have never truly been settled.

Summary of results from Alberta. Since 1994, charter schools have remained a visible issue in Alberta, but not with the same amount of salience found in 1994. Under the guidance of the Klein government, charter schools were first introduced as part of the package of education reform. During this period of heightened salience, charter schools were passed through the legislature, but not without significant debate and opposition. Many MLA's and educational critics felt that these schools were unnecessary for Alberta's students, would mark the beginnings of larger privatization in education, and had been placed on the agenda in a very hegemonic process. Arguments supporting and against charter schools were similar to those discussed in the literature review, with both sides of the debate being visible throughout. By the end, there were lingering feelings concerned that charter schools had been "pushed through" without adequate discussion and consultation. However, the experimental status of charter schools in Alberta has not yet changed, and they have yet to find systematic acceptance in the province.

While charter schools have emerged as an issue in the other two provinces in this study, Alberta has, and still remains, at the centre of Canada's charter school debate. As Alberta remains the sole province to enact charter schools, the other provinces have looked to Alberta for guidance and results for its charter schools experiment. Emanating from the effects of the Alberta debate in 1993, both British Columbia and Ontario would discuss the charter school concept, albeit in different ways.

Conclusions from Alberta. The news media did not report on charter schools prior to January 19, 1994 in Alberta, when such schools were first mentioned a few days after Premier Klein had placed them on his government's agenda with the introduction of Bill 19. Indeed, until 1994 there had been almost no mention of charter schools in the province. This supports the notion that charter schools were not a part of Klein or the Progressive Conservative platform for election, nor were they a popular issue before the introduction of the School Amendment Act. Indeed, the Alberta media had already indicated awareness concerning the impending educational reforms (Taylor, 2001), but made no mention of charter schools specifically until placed on the agenda by the Premier. The debate over charter schools in early 1994 thus must be viewed in the larger context of educational reform in the province. While Premier Klein and Minister of Education Jonson continued to promote charter schools, they remained adamant that such schools were to be considered and experiment of pilot project, and would be revaluated at a later time.

Newspaper articles indicated support and criticism from various stakeholders concerning charter schools, while many other articles maintained a more neutral position attempting to explain to the general populace what charter schools were and their educational purpose. The media reports appeared to be more polarized than legislative debates, as stronger ideological division are noted in the media, likely due to various stakeholders from both sides of the debate attempting to gain media access in order to promote their own position. According to Taylor (2001), during this period:

> education became increasingly politicized during this period as journalists relied on ..."authorized knowers" to frame and support their stories. Since a variety of

> groups also tried to use media sources to influence and mobilize public opinion, journalists and reporters played a key role in the public relations wars that were waged as government policy unfolded. This role involved highlighting conflict, identifying and/or constructing protagonists and antagonists, and making sense of events for the lay reader. (pp. 74-5)

Although the incumbent government asserted that it had held discussion and consultation for charter schools well before 1994, this was not apparent on the policy or media agendas. It was not until Bill 19 was put forth that the debate over charter schools emerged as a salient topic.

Opposition to charter schools did not appear to be ideologically opposed to the charter school concept (in comparison to the other provinces in this study), although such criticisms did appear over the perception of charter schools as a form of privatizing education. The political debates and media coverage reveal a high degree of discord during the 1994 period when charter schools were introduced and subsequently legislated. Both agendas reveal concerns over the role, place, and purpose of charter schools in the province, as well as criticism over the lack of direction and clear status that these schools would receive. Opposition to charter schools also appeared rooted in the perception that the government had introduced charter schools and pushed them through Bill 19 without adequate consultation and well thought out procedures. The concern of unclear purpose and regulations was perhaps fairly justified, as media and policy discussion after 1994 focused on many of struggles facing new charter schools including problems with start-up funding, accountability, and transportation. As Bosetti (1998a) and Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly, and Sande (2000) later found in the

initial analyses of Alberta's charter schools, they appeared to be suffering from a lack of guidance and support on the part of the province. Once Bill 19 was passed in the spring of 1994, the salience of charter schools dissipated quickly, although it would continue to be topic of debate, albeit on a smaller scale.

Charter School Issue Salience in British Columbia

Of the three provinces analyzed, newspapers in B.C. had the least coverage concerning charter schools. Media coverage of charter schools appears to have peaked around 1994-1995, when Alberta was initially bringing charters into existence (Figure 5 highlights this trend). In B.C., the salience of charter school articles in the media agenda was in 1995. As a policy issue in B.C., charter schools have received little attention compared to Alberta, being found in only 22 debates during the past 17 years. Moreover, during that period, they were not mentioned in exactly half of those years. As Figure 6 indicates, charter schools received little discussion in B.C. except during a period of heightened salience in 1995. The most discernable correlation is in 1995, which had both the largest number of debates mentioning charter schools (12) and charter school newspaper articles (35), representing approximately 54% of all policy debates and 47% of all media articles in B.C.; media and policy agendas indicate a low level of salience for charter schools in all other years. Over the past 17 years then, only 1995 saw policymakers visibly debating charter schools as an issue. Also similar to Alberta, the policy debate in B.C. is positively correlated with the media agenda. Since 1995, there has been almost no mention of charter schools in the province by the media or in the policy debates.

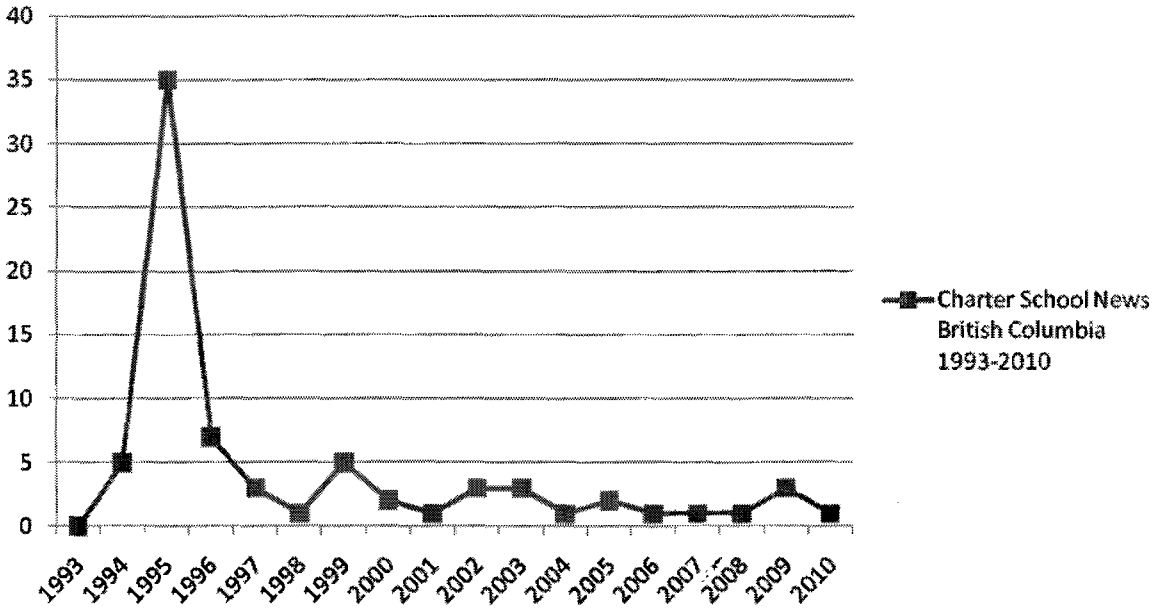

Figure 5. British Columbia newspaper articles containing "charter school(s)" (1993-2010).

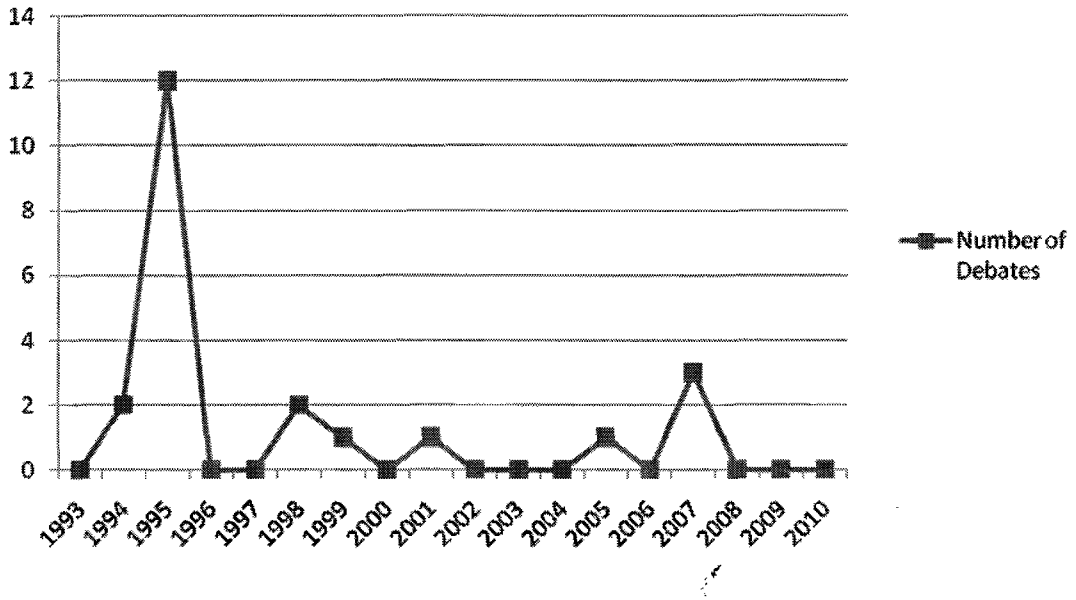

Figure 6. Number of debates containing "charter school(s)" in British Columbia (1993-2010).

The year 1995 then was the only period when charter schools emerged as a salient educational issue within the province. Before, and since, the concept has received little attention, both from the media and from policymakers. Why the issue emerged in 1995 appears to be largely a result of the changes occurring in Alberta, as advocates for choice and charter schools attempting to transfer these ideas into B.C. (Guedes, 1994, p. A35).

During this time, B.C. was led by the New Democratic Party under Premier Mike Harcourt, with the Liberal party as the official opposition. The controversy over charter schools in B.C. appeared to have been driven by two factors: leader of the opposition Gordon Campbell's apparent support for charter schools, along with a charter schools conference to be held in autumn 1995. According to several media reports, Campbell pledged support for increased choice in education throughout the province, as the *Vancouver Sun* reported:

> Party leader Gordon Campbell says if the Liberals win the next provincial election, parents will have the right to choose the best schools for their children— including controversial options as charter schools, traditional schools, home schooling and year-round schooling. (Balcom, 1995, p. B8)

Similarly, the *Times-Colonist* reported that, "Liberal education critic Lynn Stephens's address to about 300 delegates to the B.C. School Trustees Association annual general meeting raised eyebrows and hackles as she cited Liberal support for district amalgamations and charter schools" (Sullivan, 1995, p. 1). Indeed, Stephens had been the first to show support for charter schools in the legislature almost a year earlier stating, "Charter schools are an innovative approach to restructuring education that has

a potential to resolve many problems confronting education today, such as bureaucracies, high costs, low accountability and a sameness that satisfies few" (Stephens, 1994, June 15). Stephens would continue to support charter schools publicly, including debates with NDP members and Minister of Education Art Charbonneau directly (Stephens, 1995, April 21; April 27). Thus, while the charter schools debate was continuing in Alberta, it slowly moved in B.C. This policy transfer may be simply a result of proximity, where the policy debate did not significantly appear in Ontario until about 1996/1997.

Also in similar fashion to the other provinces, charter schools began to appear in the policy debates within the larger discussions concerning deficit reduction and possible education restructuring. Barbara Copping, NDP, Port Moody-Burnaby Mountain mentioned charter schools within discussion of the provincial budget:

> Second, the budget set out to maintain the strongest economy in Canada. British Columbia has that. I'll repeat that: the strongest economy in Canada. And third, the budget set out to maintain very important and needed services, such as health and education. The budget will not permit the privatization of health care or the semi-privatization of education in the form of charter schools. (Copping, 1995, April 4)

And as Premier Harcourt later discussed:

> We are carrying out all sorts of other efficiencies to take that balanced approach of bringing down spending levels and getting rid of waste and duplication, and to maintain medicare—not to go to a two-tier health care system like the Liberals want, and not to go to a charter schools public education system that's a

> private education in a public education system that the Liberals want, but to maintain good-quality public education and to invest in the future with a well-thought-out plan, which I have shown the members before. (Harcourt, 1995, June 29)

From the onset, charter schools were perceived as a form of privatization, and were vehemently rejected by NDP members. Although Liberal opposition members did continue to bring up the issue (at least in 1995), the debates only lasted between the spring and fall of that year, with members of the government consistently asserting the same point, that charter schools had no place in B.C. education. However, the issue did continue to arise, with plans in place for a conference to be held in autumn 1995 to discuss the possibility of charter schools. By spring of 1995, several members of the NDP had noted their resistance to charter school ideas being manufactured in the province. Additionally, shortly after this, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation would release a position paper against the introduction of charter schools in the province (Kuehn, 1995). Jan Pullinger, NDP, Cowichan-Ladysmith, highlighted these concerns as:

> Public education; we all just take it for granted. I find it distressing to hear members in both parties opposite talking about things like charter schools. They talk about giving parents a choice. We all know that what they are talking about is at least the partial privatizing of our education system. We all know that by doing that, we're shifting control from democratically elected school boards to a handful of special interest groups that want to make decisions about schools. We all know that privatizing will probably ultimately cost us more dollars

> overall and provide a special-agenda education for a few at the expense of the rest of us, and that's simply unacceptable. (Pullinger, 1995, April 10)

A few weeks later, another NDP MLA, Helmut Giesbrecht would echo the same sentiments, asserting that "charter schools have no place in the public education system in British Columbia" (Giesbrecht, 1995, April 21).

These comments brought him into debate with Stephens, highlighting what was perhaps the most fervent public debate concerning charter schools in B.C. However although Stephens claimed the Liberal members of the house agreed with his position on the issue, by the end of 1995, Liberal members would already backtrack on their promise to include charter schools and would instead only accommodate them if the public system could not provide adequate choices ("Reading Between Liberal Lines," 1995). This may have been attributed to a charter school conference held during the first week of November 1995. Prior to the conference, there was a visible debate between leaders of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation and the Society for Excellence in Education which organized the conference. Indeed, the teachers' federation refused to cover the professional development costs for any teachers wishing to attend the conference (Dutton, 1995). At the time, Minister of Education Art Charbonneau, who supported the unions' position, was largely opposed to the formation of charter schools in the province.

Art's antagonism. Charbonneau emerged immediately as a vocal opponent to introducing charter schools during this period. On several occasions he publicly stated opposition to charter schools, and did not appear to detract from this position at any point. As Minister of Education, this contrasts directly with the Alberta experience

where Jonson clearly supported the formation of charter schools, and in Ontario under Snobelen, who appeared to favour the formation of charters. Thus, on several occasions Charbonneau maintained his position against charter schools in B.C.:

> There are those who say that we can't accomplish all of this within the education system as it is currently constituted, that we must go to different kinds of models to permit different kinds of choices. One of the favourites brought forward is the voucher system, or charter schools. Let it be as clear as can be that neither the voucher system nor the charter school system is acceptable to this government— and certainly not to this minister—and it will not happen on my watch. I believe in the equality of education, in high standards, in accountability, in relevance for all students in British Columbia, from the smallest district and the smallest school to the largest, to every choice of career opportunity that a young man and woman is facing. To all of those who are in economic stress or not, whatever their background, I believe fundamentally in equality—the equality of funding, the equality of opportunity. I will not buy into the rhetoric that says we can have one level of education and schooling for some children but another for the remainder. I will not buy into a two-tier education system, any more than I will buy into a two-tier health care system. We can deliver the quality and the relevance and the standards and the accountability to every student in British Columbia. We can show, through our actions that we validate every career option that young men and women are pursuing. And we will not—we will never—slip to the position that some children will get one

level of education, while others must be satisfied with another, lesser level of education. (Charbonneau, 1995, April 25)

The promise of charter schools that some would make, in order to address some of their perceived problems in education, I think is totally false. I think it is a slippery slope—either the voucher system or the charter school system—towards a distinctly two-tier education system. It is a system where some groups of parents see that through more extensive control and participation, they can deliver one level of education to the children in that school, and they feel the public schools in that area can be satisfied with a lesser level of education. That, to me, is not acceptable. (Charbonneau, 1995, April 27)

It is also vitally important to have equality of opportunity. This is one area where we have profound differences with the opposition Liberals. We believe in a high-quality system for all students, and we oppose charter schools, which would provide a higher level of education for some students while others get by with less. We will not permit a two-tier education system to be established in British Columbia. (Charbonneau, 1995, June 8)

Charbonneau's position was thus clearly based on supporting the existing public system rather than moving towards choice in any manner. Helen Raham, a former teacher in British Columbia and early supporter of charter schools, concluded that

British Columbia has flatly rejected the option (of charter schools), as a succession of Ministers has referred to the concept as elitist and a form of privatization. Education Minister Charbonneau boycotted a charter schools

> conference in Vancouver at which several of his counterparts were featured presenters. (Raham, 1998, p. 13)

However, even as Charbonneau was replaced in 1996, the charter schools issue did not remerge in B.C. Under both Social Credit and Liberal governments, charter schools never appeared to have gained any widespread support.

Summary of results from British Columbia. Of the three provinces analyzed in this study, charter schools received the least amount of salience in educational policy debates in British Columbia. Only in 1995 did charter schools emerge as a contestable issue, but quickly dissipated. While the opposition Liberals did appear to encourage the expansion of charters into the province, they quickly renounced that position. The social credit government and particularly then Minister of Education Art Charbonneau spoke out critically and vehemently against the idea of charters. Similarly, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation was opposed to the concept from the outset. Thus, in comparison to Alberta and subsequently Ontario, charter schools did not find a receptive audience and quickly declined as a salient issue thereafter. The issue of charter schools in B.C. may then be viewed as an example of policy transfer of educational policy between two Canadian provinces. However, significant differences in political culture between the provinces resulted in the charter schools debate manifesting in very different ways.

Conclusions from British Columbia. Policy debates during this period consistently indicate that the NDP had little interest in charter schools, and under the leadership of Minister of Education Art Charbonneau defended the public system in the province. Although the charter school issue emerged in B.C. shortly after doing so in Alberta, charter schools did not find a receptive audience politically. In the media,

newspaper reporting during this period on increased salience draws parallels with other provinces, as the media appeared much more polarized by the issue than policymakers.

The charter schools debate in B.C. differed from Alberta and Ontario, in that the incumbent party appeared strictly against charter schools proposals, while in the other two provinces, charter schools were extensively criticized by members of the opposition. The conference on charter schools appeared to incite considerable debate at the time between proponents and opponents of charter schools, with the BCTF challenging the concept immediately. Finally, given Gordon Campbell's initial remarks that charter schools could exist in Alberta, it is somewhat surprising that upon his election victory in 2001 the issue of charter schools did not reemerge in B.C. One would have hypothesized that the Gordon Campbell Liberal government, which had appeared to support pro school choice polices since 2001 (Fallon & Paquette, 2008), would appear to have also supported charter schools based on 1995 discussions. However, since his election, charter schools have not returned as a salient issue in B.C.

Charter School Issue Salience in Ontario

In Ontario, charter schools did not appear to be a salient issue by the news media until about 1995. From then, they began to receive greater media attention until about 1999, when they gradually became less visible on the media agenda. Out of the three provinces analyzed, Ontario newspapers provided considerably less media coverage towards the issue of charter schools than Alberta, but more than British Columbia (Figure 7 shows the trends in reporting of charter school news). In comparison to Alberta and B.C., charter schools appeared on the media agenda around the same time, although slightly later in Ontario.

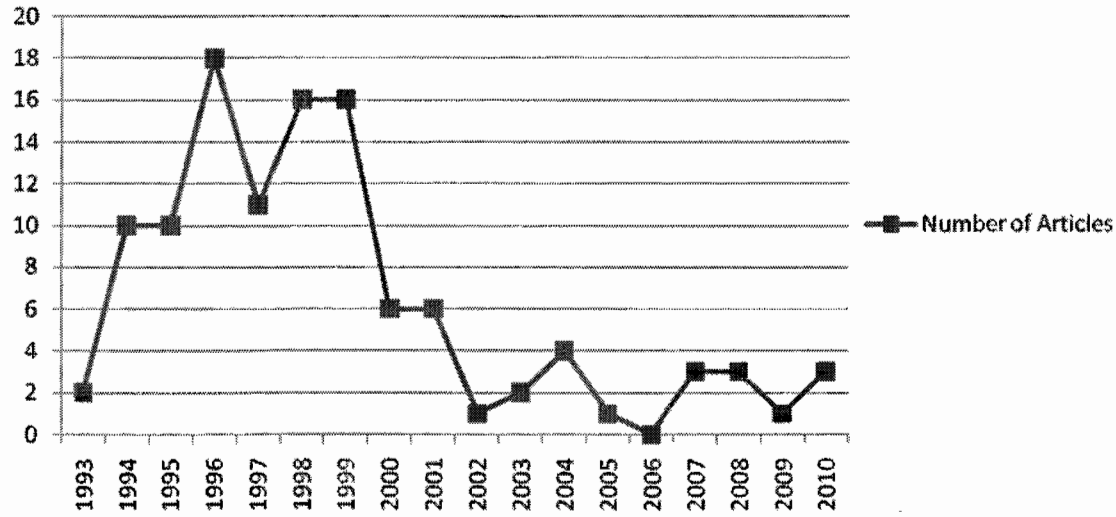

Figure 7. Ontario newspaper articles containing "charter school(s)" (1993-2010).

The issue of charter schools became most salient on the policy agenda in 1997, with 18 debates mentioning the term, while on the media agenda it appeared to be most salient in 1996, with 18 articles. Thus, in Ontario we find an indication that the media agenda may have been responsible for the subsequent increase in charter school salience by policymakers. However, the very next year, the media agenda dropped to a level actually below the policy agenda. This was the only time this occurred in all three provinces (with the exception of small variations in B.C.). Figure 8 highlights this trend. Charter schools then did not appear on the media agenda until 1996 and peaked a year later in 1997, with 18 debates mentioning the issue, representing 37% of policy debates in Ontario. Since then, the policy agenda has shown a dramatic decrease in charter schools as a salient issue. Indeed, charter schools have not been mentioned in the Ontario policy agenda since 2003.

Creating a crisis? In July 1995, Minister of Education John Snobelen was recorded stating his intentions to invent a crisis in education in order to create conditions where necessary reforms could occur. As Dave Caplan, Liberal, Don Valley East highlights:

> There was a startling admission. It began at the very beginning of the mandate of this government. Fortunately, we have the former Minister of Education here. Nobody would believe this except it was on videotape and it was transcribed. He said, "Our goal is to create a crisis in education." That wasn't it; it was for a purpose. What was that purpose? The purpose was to undermine the system and bankrupt education. In fact, those are the exact words he used: "We will bankrupt education and one of two outcomes will happen. Either the system will be totally

> broken and we'll be able to rebuild it in the image, in the ideology, in the manner and in the fashion we want, or those stakeholders, parents, students, teachers, school boards, those people who are involved with education will be so desperate to hang on to whatever they have that they will be willing to accept anything that we impose on them." That is exactly what the then Minister of Education, Mr. Snobelen, had to say. (Caplan, 2000, May 17)

These comments (along with the fact that Snobelen had been a high school dropout) created considerable distrust during his tenure as Minister of Education beginning in 1995. The "crisis" incident proceeded to produce similar criticisms as had occurred in Alberta when Premier Klein had failed to articulate an exact definition of charter schools. Opposition members in Ontario used this mistake to attack the integrity and intentions of Snobelen and the Conservative government over the next few years as several educational reforms were brought forth.

In Ontario, charter schools appeared to have gradually increased as a salient issue beginning around 1995, firstly on the media agenda. However, even the previous year, several media articles began to discuss charter schools as result of the debates being generated in Alberta at the same time. Similarly, the very next year the media continued to discuss charter schools with the same degree of salience, although in 1995 several articles note the developments in British Columbia already discussed. By 1996, media reporting of charter schools would reach its peak, when it appeared that the idea to implement such schools was beginning to become a real possibility in Ontario. As Francine Dube reported in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Samuel Genest, a school in the Ottawa-Carleton region had recently initiated the idea of becoming a charter school.

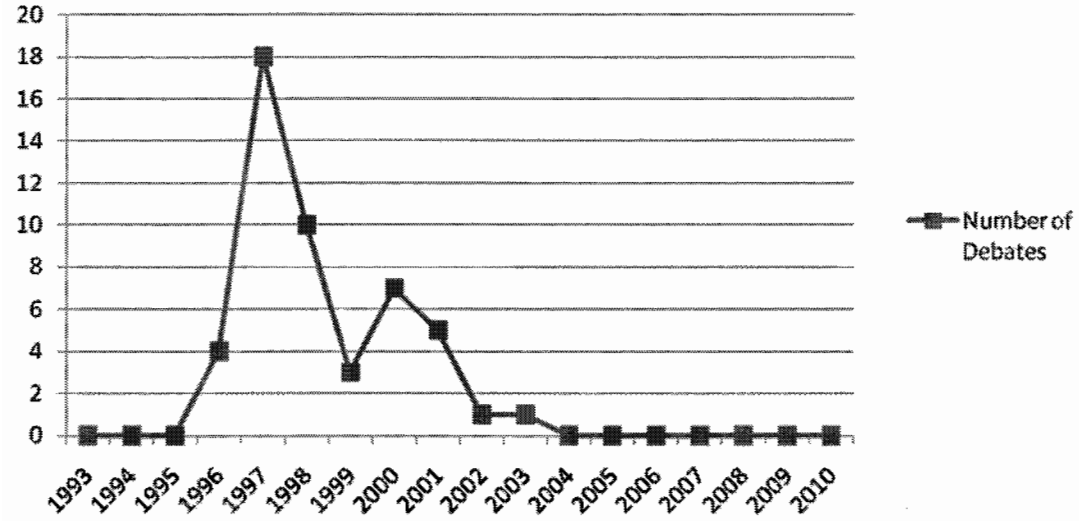

Figure 8. Number of debates containing "charter school(s)" in Ontario (1993-2010).

In response,

> "We've been studying charter schools," Snobelen said Tuesday in a telephone interview from Toronto. "We have said that we would consider them, and so if someone sent a proposal to me for a chartered school, we'd have to look at it to see if it makes sense." (Dube, 1996, p. A1)

By October 1996, Ontario would hold a conference for charter schools in Scarborough, sponsored by the right-wing Donner Canadian Foundation (Small, 1996, October 21). Henceforth, charter schools would increasingly be included in policy debates, as it appeared that they were to be implemented in some form in Ontario. As Sean Conway, Liberal, Renfrew North highlighted: "When I hear from friends in the educational community and old colleagues in the department of education about this very great interest in charter schools" (1996, October 24).

A few days earlier, Snobelen had already been questioned directly on the Conservative position towards charter schools by Jim Brown, Progressive Conservative, Scarborough West:

> My question is for the Minister of Education and Training. Community-based schools run by parent and community volunteers bring decision-making to the lowest level: the level of the front-line. Community or charter schools reduce bureaucracy and increase the funds available for the classroom. In 1974, New York City's Central Park East Secondary School in Harlem became locally managed and controlled. Twenty-five years later its college success rates were double those of other schools in the area. Parents were poor—85% of students were black or Hispanic—but the parents cared more for their kids than the

bureaucracy. Local decision-making for local needs. What is the future of community or charter schools in Ontario? (Brown, 1996, October 21)

Snobelen responded by stating:

I want to thank the member for Scarborough West for the question. There has been a lot of debate in education communities about what constitutes a community school or a charter school, and those terms are used interchangeably in some conversations. But there's little doubt that the most critical decisions that are made in education are made at or near the classroom by teachers and principals and parents and students. There's been a lot of speculation about the consideration our government is now giving to changes in funding and governance, but I want to assure the member for Scarborough West and other members in this chamber that these changes are being looked at from a viewpoint of making sure that every student in the province ... [Speaker interrupts and informs Snobelen to answer the question.]

... has the same opportunity to a quality education and that the vital link between parents and teachers is enforced and enhanced and that these decisions made close to the classroom can be made in openness. I can assure the member for Scarborough West that the cornerstone of any of these reforms will be a regional governance structure and a community involvement in our schools. As I've said earlier, there is no question that parent and community involvement in the school enhances education, no question about that at all, and as we look at the changes we might have in governance and education, we'll be looking at the experiences of other people around the world in this circumstance. But I want to

> assure the member for Scarborough West and the other members in this chamber that without doubt you have to have an excellent public education system if charter schools are to work, and we will do that. (Snobelen, 1996, October 21)

Based on these comments it would appear that Snobelen and the Conservative government did have a vision of education that included charter schools in the future. The comments, combined with Snobelen's publicly stated interest in charter schools, and the release of his policy document *Excellence in Education: Ontario's Plan for Reform* pushed the issue into increased salience in Ontario. While the Alberta experience appeared to have been more strongly focused with cost, deficit reduction, and choice as central tenants supporting charter schools, the vision in Ontario appeared to have been more strongly geared by notions of efficiency. Teachers in Ontario felt that their professionalism under attack by a right-wing agenda. Thus, by the end of 1996, there appears to have been the general impression that charter schools were coming to Ontario in some manner, and were being significantly "considered" by the Conservative government by that time.

Moving Towards Reform: 1997. Beginning in 1997, debates concerning Bill 104, the Fewer School Boards Act (1997) would combine with the perception that charter schools were on their way, along with other educational reforms, brought opposition members into increased criticism of charter schools. Bill 104 proposed to reduce the number of school boards as well as trustee representation and caps on their remuneration, and create and Education Improvement Commission to oversee the changes to take place (Gidney, 1999). Although charter schools were not specifically mentioned in the act, the perception that they were on the way had already emerged. Lyn McLeod, Liberal, Fort

William, expressed her concern that charter schools were already part of the governments hidden agenda towards privatizing public education and creating an essentially two tiered system:

> The other concern that has been expressed if we see school boards essentially being eliminated is that this may be the beginning of a move to the widespread introduction of charter schools in Ontario. It may sound appealing, it may sound like the ultimate in parent management of schools, but I am extremely concerned that it is a very frightening prospect for the future of public education. I hope this isn't part of the hidden agenda of government: to render school boards useless and eventually do away with them altogether, substitute that with parent councils that eventually have widespread decision-making powers essentially to establish charter schools. (McLeod, 1997, January 21)

Similarly, Rosario Marchese, NDP, Fort York, commented:

> Buried among the Education Improvement Commission's responsibilities is the Harris government's hidden agenda: the establishment of charter schools. We will see private schools in Ontario funded by public boards. That's what this is all about. It's a sad chain of events that is occurring here, nothing to do with accountability and effectiveness but something else. (Marchese, 1997, January 28)

On the same note, Gilles Bisson, NDP, Cochrane South, continued to make similar accusations concerning the state of educational reform:

> What this government is really trying to do is take over education, not to do the kinds of things that need to be done around consolidation in order to find the

> savings so you can reinvest it back into our system of public education to make it better. This government is trying to take over education for a very simple reason: He who controls the purse-strings calls the shots. This government has no commitment to public education and wants to move the way of private charter schools, and what better way to do that than to take over the system in its entirety and then do the devastation work that they want to undertake. (Bisson, 1997, January 28)

These comments indicate initial opposition to charter schools, coupled with the belief that charter schools were essentially a form of privatizing education. Publicly, there does not appear to have been any formal mentioning that charter schools were to be placed on the government's agenda or introduced in a future bill. Indeed, by April, Snobelen already had appeared to have backtracked on the charter school idea he initially supported. According to Francine Dube in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Snobelen stated that, "I don't think it's time for Ontario to get on the charter school bandwagon, personally, right now ... I think what we need to do is fix the fundamentals in our publicly funded education system" (Dube, 1997, p. A4).

However, opposition members continued to question whether or not the Tories were actually in favour of implementing charter schools or not as tensions increased. Thus, by the time Bill 160 was officially introduced in the fall of 1997, charter schools had already emerged as an issue in both the policy and media agendas.

Protesting Bill 160. On September 22, 1997, Snobelen introduced Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act, which primarily aimed to centralize educational funding. Additionally, the bill included provisions to implement standardized testing, cut

teaching preparation time, and control other teacher working conditions. The bill incited considerable debate amongst educational stakeholders. As Michele Landsberg reported in the *Toronto Star*, "The Ontario government's Bill 160—"The Education Quality Improvement Act"—has nothing to do with education, with quality, with improvement. If you sift through the hundreds of little legalese clauses in this chillingly named act, you'll see that it has to do solely with power" Landsberg, 1997, p. L1). These concerns would result in protest in the literal sense, as Ontario teachers would go on a 3-week strike in response to the proposed changes.

Moreover, as a result of the massive opposition to the bill, Premier Harris was forced to replace Snobelen with Dave Johnson in the fall of 1997. Again, it should be noted that charter schools had never officially been placed on the government's agenda. However, during September until December 1, 1997 when Bill 160 was passed, legislative debates again took an extremely critical stance towards charter schools as there remained a dominant perception that Bill 160 would essentially lay the framework for such schools to be established in Ontario. As Sandra Pupatello, Liberal, Windsor-Sandwich articulated:

> I would like to speak today about the Liberal Party's opposition to Bill 160. This is very reminiscent of the kind of legislation that was brought into California in 1976 with their referenda legislation, which essentially barred states from raising taxes for a whole variety of purposes without first being able to gain that support through referenda in the state of California. What that led to at that time was a proliferation of charter schools. The complete dissatisfaction of middle-class America in California because the public school system was simply not funded

> adequately led people to pull their children from those schools and move them into private schools. (Pupatello, 1997, November 19)

Lyn McLeod, Liberal, Fort William, echoed this sentiment:

> We all know that what you've done is open the doors wide open to charter schools and to the privatization of public education. Will you reassure people, tell them categorically today you won't be turning the management of schools over to parent councils and you will not be launching charter schools across Ontario? (McLeod, 1997, November 19)

The debates concerning charter schools in Ontario must thus be viewed within the context of larger reforms and restructuring occurring during the same period. This draws several parallels with Alberta and the charter school debate within Bill 19 in 1994. The main difference of course being that charter schools were actually included formally in the latter bill. However, both periods show a tremendous amount of discord as Alberta and then Ontario moved towards increased central control over education. On the final day of debate over Bill 160, Minister of Education Dave Johnson was specifically questioned on the issue of charter schools. In similar fashion to Snobelen, he would not clearly respond to the question being asked by MPP Sandra Pupatello: "My question is for the Minister of Education. We would like to hear your government's position on charter schools" (Pupatello, December 1, 1997). Johnson replied:

> It doesn't seem to be too popular with the opposition, but I will say we're going through a difficult period of time. There's a lot of healing to do, there's a lot of work to do in terms of the education system that's before us today. My focus,

my full intention at this point is to do nothing other than to make the system we have in place today work. There's the funding formula, for example, that's been a topic of previous questions that has to be dealt with, the curriculum changes to the system in place. Those are where my energies are going to be focused. (Johnson, December 1, 1997)

Pupatello:

I asked a very specific question, I asked you what your position was on charter schools. That's not what you answered.

The bill you just passed opens the door to charter schools, as you know, in a whole series of areas. This is a very covert operation to move our education system towards charter schools. We think you should come clean. Are you for or against charter schools in Ontario? (Pupatello December 1, 1997)

Johnson:

I will indicate the obvious, that lobbying is something that takes place on a regular basis at Queen's Park. People lobby and speak for all sorts of issues. It's a free society. The member for Scarborough West is entitled to speak wherever he wants.

Mr. Robson, not the first chair but a chair of the Ontario Parent Council, is an individual, I'm sure, with a great background and one who has his own personal opinions. My opinion is that in the immediate future we should focus on the present system, ensuring excellence within the present system. That's exactly what I intend to do through the curriculum, through the other changes in Bill 160,

and that will be the focus of my energies completely. (Johnson, December 1, 1997)

MPP Pupatello would later return to this discussion, claiming that the Minister did not want to answer the question because the Conservative government continued to support charter school as part of their hidden agenda. These concerns were similar to those found in B.C., where charter schools were largely opposed due to a strong perception that they were a form of privatizing education

However, although he would not specifically address his support or opposition to charter schools at this time, once Bill 160 had passed and the debate over charter schools again subsided, Johnson appeared less inclined to support charter schools and later indicated that although the door is not closed to proposing charters, they would go against the fundamental principles of education in Ontario (Raham, 1998). Moreover, the newly formed Education Improvement Commission released a report that charter schools would undermine the public system in Ontario (Lewington, 1997, December 20).

By 1998 then, the period of greatest salience concerning charter schools appeared to have already subsided. Over the next couple of years charter schools would remain visible in the media and legislative debates, but without the intensity that was evidenced in the 1996/1997 period of reform. When considering the decline of charter schools in Ontario, it is clear that even before his election as Premier in 2003, Dalton McGuinty was fiercely opposed to the educational changes brought about by the Tories (McGuinty, 1998, September 28). The subsequent tax credit that the Harris government would initiate in 2001 was also repealed immediately upon McGuinty's election. Thus, his

tenure as Premier has continued to oppose school choice policies and the charter school issue has dissipated in the province.

Summary of results from Ontario. During the 1995-1997 period charter schools emerged as a contested topic in educational policy debates in Ontario. The concept appeared to have come largely from Alberta, where charter schools were legislated just a few years earlier. Hence, the charter school debate in Ontario draws many parallels from what occurred only a few years earlier in Alberta. Charter schools as an issue fit between what was a period of transition and restricting in Ontario. This period was marked be extreme discontent from teachers in the province, eventually resulting in three weeks of protest. Charter schools, as well as many of the other proposed reforms, were opposed by teachers and other educational stakeholders on ideological grounds—as there was a dominant perception that the Harris government was keen on privatizing the education sector. Thus, charter schools were not, and still have not, been brought into the province to date.

Conclusions from Ontario. In Ontario, the 1997 period was defined by extreme strife and discord as the Tory government initiated several large-scale changes in educational administration in the province. These changes brought by Premier Harris have been labelled the "Common Sense Revolution," a comparison to the "Klein Revolution" which occurred in Alberta. There appeared to have been a significant amount of policy borrowing from Alberta, and indeed opposition members on several occasions accused the Harris government of doing just that. Both right-wing Conservative governments sought to reform educational administration in a similar manner, which incited considerable debate amongst educational stakeholders. As

Schugurensky (1998) highlights, "When viewed in context, Bill 160 appears to be part of a larger trend within Canada towards privatization. Similar right-wing governments in Alberta have enacted educational reforms which are comparable to Bill 160" (para. 4). Thus, charter schools in Ontario must be viewed as part of the larger package of educational reform occurring at the time. Once Bill 160 was passed, which did not include any charter school legislation, the issue began to decrease in prominence significantly.

In the media and policy debates there emerged strong opposition to these educational reforms, increased fears concerning the possibility of "privatizing education" along with a genuinely negative perception towards what charter schools represent to education. Again, charter schools appear to have been discussed with respect to what they appeared to represent: a hidden agenda for the privatization of public education. Also similar to Alberta, the media provided a more balanced view of charter schools. Most articles differ, whether in support or against charter schools, along with others taking a neutral position reporting on developments. The biggest difference was of course that Ontario did not bring in any legislation for charter schools, and since the 1997 period charter schools gradually declined as an issue. With the election of Liberal government under Dalton McGuinty in 2003, the charter school debate in Ontario has all but disappeared.

Summary of Issue Salience Results

Issue salience in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario concerning charter schools showed several key differences, along with many similarities over the past 17 years. The issue of charter schools in educational policy emerged at different times in the

different provinces. Yet, it was during the mid-late 1990s that charter schools appeared to have peaked as an issue in Canada. Since 2000, they have seemingly dropped off the agenda, although still mentioned occasionally in Alberta. Even in Alberta however, opposition to their existence still lingers (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2011). The charter school issue appeared to incite considerable debate amongst policymakers, while media reporting took more neutral positions towards the topic. Nevertheless, there remained a great deal of discord towards implementing charter schools, a feeling that was quite possible held throughout Canada, and perhaps still today.

Criticisms of charter schools, many of which suggest that they are a quasi-form of educational privatization, are given support through the charter school experience in Canada. In Alberta, charter schools emerged as part of the Klein agenda towards fiscal reform of the public sector. In Ontario, charter schools emerged under very similar conditions. Even in B.C. where the debate was most limited, charter schools were connected to discussions of the current budget. These similarities support the notion that charter schools were, to some extent, viewed as a measure of cost-cutting in educational spending.

The development and establishment of charter schools in Alberta must be viewed as phenomenon which occurred at a certain time and in a certain place which provided an environment conducive for such schools to appear. In this respect, political culture may offer better explanations as to why Alberta was so receptive to such schools in the first place, and why the other Canadian provinces then, and now, have resisted charter schools in public education.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Results from the previous chapter indicated the salience of charter schools as an educational policy issue in three distinct provinces. However, all other Canadian provinces with the exception of Alberta have resisted implementing charter schools. This final chapter connects the results concerning issue salience with specific historical, political, and cultural particularities which define education in Canada. Discussion of how these characteristics have affected charter schools development follows. The study concludes by discussing the potential future for charter schools in Canada.

Summary of Issue Salience

The analysis of charter school issue salience and the policy debates which ensued in three separate Canadian provinces provide a picture of how the charter schools debated manifested itself in different ways. Beginning in Alberta, moving into British Columbia, and then emerging in Ontario, charter schools became a contentious issue in each province. These debates, along with the fact that only one province has chosen charter schools to date, indicate an overarching resistance amongst Canadians to such schools. Hence, although the results of the previous chapter highlight the relative salience of charter schools in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, results from the agenda setting analysis of charter school alone remains inadequate.

While an agenda setting framework is useful in hindsight to explore salient trends over time, predicting the future of an issue is a much more difficult task. Thus, "We still encounter considerable doses of messiness, accident, fortuitous coupling, and dumb luck. Subjects sometimes rise on agendas without our understanding completely why" (Kingdon, 1995, p. 206). Connecting the results concerning salience to the particular

periods of educational reform may then assist in the interpretation of how charter schools were, or were not, placed on the agenda in the different provinces. To determine exactly *why* charter schools appeared to be a more salient issue during the 1990s, particularly in Alberta, somewhat later in Ontario, and almost not at all in British Columbia, the focus of this chapter is to connect the results of the agenda setting analysis to other factors which continue to affect the development of charter schools in Canada.

Discussion of Political Culture and Education in Canada

Why have charter schools failed to establish themselves in Canada? The remainder of the study highlights factors which define Canadian educational administration and organization, and which appear to have been significant factors against the formation of charter schools. Political culture has played a strong part in Canadian resistance towards charter schools. The case for educational provincialism, along with a specific political culture in Alberta is discussed, which describes how and why charter schools appear to have developed solely in that province. From there, other factors including a lack of a strong federal presence, teacher unions, as well as notions of moderatism, deference, and equity are described as values which have impeded charter school development in Canada. To begin to understand the complex nature of educational reform in Canada, an analysis of historical, legal, and political factors which distinctly shape Canadian education is necessary.

Canadian Educational Provincialism

Education in Canada is complicated by historical precedents in organization, funding, and control, as well as a somewhat ambiguous federal presence. Wilson and Lazerson (1982) summarize the complexities surrounding the issue of school choice in

Canada as, "The legal and practical power of the provinces in the area of education, the tendencies toward regional identity, and the awkward but real presence of the federal government greatly complicate educational analysis in Canada" (p. 7). Similarly, from the agenda setting literature, Soroka (2002a) asserts that there is a widely held belief that there is no national newspaper agenda in Canada, and issues are treated very differently based on region and/or language.

After confederation in 1867, by the provisions of section 93 of the BNA Act, each province maintained exclusive jurisdiction over its educational organization and administration. Largely as a result, as Stevenson (1981) asserts, "While it is often done, no one is in an unchallengeable position to speak for 'Canadian education'; technically, it is safe to speak only of "education in Canada" (p. 9). Moreover, "In a country where the provinces retain enormous power and where regional identities often override national identity, discussion of education on a nationwide basis is necessarily complex" (Wilson & Lazerson, 1982, p. 9). Canadian regionalism, which has historically been a hallmark of Canadian culture and identity in education, remains a significant factor in the development and expansion, or lack thereof, of charter schools in Canada. The distinct educational arrangements, regional identities, political cultures, and lack of a federal presence all affect the development of education in Canada and must be acknowledged accordingly.

While there are a great many similarities in the provincial and territorial education systems across Canada, there are significant differences in curriculum, assessment, and accountability policies among the jurisdictions that express the geography, history, language, culture, and corresponding specialized needs of the populations served

(CMEC, 2010). The regionalized nature of Canadian education also comes to fruition in relation to curriculum and teaching. As an example, Wiseman (2007) indicates that teachers in Quebec tend to focus considerable attention on Quebec's unique history and culture, while Ontario tends to downplay provincial history for broader national history (p. 19). National and regional tensions may be viewed as:

> Today, forces such as increased interprovincial and international mobility and the development of a global economy, coupled with efforts to equalize educational opportunities and to see schools play a role in promoting and sustaining a sense of Canadian identity, have produced pressures for increased standardization of schools and curricula across the country. Yet, at the same time, countervailing pressures require schools to acknowledge the linguistic, regional, and cultural diversity of the country, and to empower individuals and communities to exert more control over the school experiences of their children. (Young & Levin, 1998, p. 28)

As a result of Canadian provincialism, each educational jurisdiction has developed its own legacies and particularities, which inevitably affect the policy process. Hence, although we may look to the prevailing public philosophy as a guide to trends and rationale for educational reform, the specific structure along with the dominant individuals and stakeholders in education at any given time give much more detail to a policy analysis.

In the past two decades education policy has become much less consensual, much more conflicted, and increasingly driven by political agendas of governments (Levin &

Young, 1997). Hence, although provincial governments have continued to shape the direction of educational policy, they have done so in a typically Canadian way:

> Provincial jurisdictions have exercised significant control over the growth and conduct of alternatives. Where choice in the United States is often seen as an expression of individual rights, the Canadian view—albeit influenced by views prevalent in the United States—is that choice ought to be accommodated within a framework of regulatory and financial control designed primarily to ensure equality among alternatives. (Ungerleider, 2003, p. 199)

Nevertheless, each province must contend with the issue of school choice and charter schools in respect to the defining characteristics, educationally and in a wider respect culturally, of that region. Hence, "appreciation of regional political cultures deepens understanding of Canadian identity" (Wiseman, 2007, p. 114). As Holmes (2008) concludes, "Currently, school choice in Canada is stable. Provincialism, in both senses of the word, is a major factor in Canadian political life" (p. 204). Similarly, "I would suggest that education—and to some extent learning—will continue to be primarily matters of provincial jurisdiction" (Shapiro, 1981, p. 144). The specific political culture of Alberta, combined with political leaders with a specific ideological agenda particularly during the early 1990s, may provide further insight towards why it remains the only province to support charter schools in Canada.

Political Culture and Educational Reform in Alberta

Pierce, Lovrich, Steel, Steger, and Tennert (2000) define political culture as "that mix of values, traditions, conventional actions, common symbols and prevailing expectations that guide the fundamental course of a society's characteristic approach to

the collective resolution of conflict" (p. 3). Alberta has traditionally been governed by right-wing political parties (Gereluk, 2000). Since the 1971 election of the Conservative government under Premier Peter Lougheed, Alberta had continued to approach public policy in a neoconservative fashion, which promoted public–private partnerships in many areas, including education (Wagner, 1999). Historically, Alberta has been characterized culturally as the most American of the Canadian provinces, with a greater emphasis on individualism and corporatism (Taylor, 2001; Wiseman, 2007).

In Alberta, after initial Ontarian influence, Americans played a more pivotal role than in any other province. Indeed, although not to be over-exaggerated, "Alberta has come closer than any other Canadian province to imitating the politics of America, particularly of the American Great Plains States" (Wiseman, 2007, p. 244). Wiseman (2007) provides an example of this perception with the debate over wheat pricing. In the 1990s this assertion of libertarian thought reemerged, as Alberta's right-wing Conservative government supported and its farmers voted for an open competitive marketing regime, while Saskatchewan's left-wing NDP government supported and its farmers voted to maintain the Canadian Wheat Board's monopoly. Thus, Albertans, unlike nearby Saskatchewanians, pronounced a rugged individualism which had always characterized the farmers of Alberta. Although control over wheat farmers is hardly synonymous with educational reform, the charter school question as to why they have emerged only in Alberta out of all Canadian provinces may be answered partially with Alberta's maintenance of more traditional American values. According to Helmer (1995), Alberta has historically been different than the rest of Canada, defined by a strong sense of individualism, social conservativism, and competitiveness. These characteristics

have been augmented by a strong relationship with the United States as, "Alberta's economic and social connection to the U.S. has always been at least as strong as its east-west connections to the rest of Canada" (Helmer, 1995, p. 71).

In 1992, the Economic Council of Canada released *Alot to Learn*, which proposed that achievement in public education could be improved through reducing interference, increasing the freedom of principals, disseminating assessment results, and increasing parental choice among schools. Few provinces received this message more enthusiastically than Alberta (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). Following the election of the Ralph Klein government in June 1993, the province undertook a period of large-scale reform, in education and other social sectors, what has been labeled the "Klein Revolution." Subsequently, his government quickly embarked on a plan of deficit-reduction and government restructuring, consistent with both the prevailing public philosophy of the period as well as characteristic of Alberta's pattern of reform.

According to Barlow and Robertson (1994), by 1992, no other Canadian province had reformed their educational priorities as much as Alberta. This included being one of the most vigorous proponents of national standardized testing and test-score results. According to Kachur (1999), what emerged during this period was a unique strategy based on the principles of neoliberalism and the current political realities of the province. Indeed, "Charter schools could be set to fit in with the fiscal plan by creating site-based management, remove the middle layer of bureaucracy, and reduce expenditures by only giving per pupil grants without any capital funding" (Gereluk, 2000, p. 7).

The overwhelming perception from the so called "Klein Revolution" has been in hindsight, a period of rapid policy development centred around the principles of

neoliberalism, fuelled by the advocates of the New Right. After 1993, Alberta led the way in importing right-wing ideologies into the nation from Britain, New Zealand, and the United States. Thereafter, "Alberta's policy reforms gained positive notoriety among various journalists, academics, and politicians already sympathetic to similar ideas" (Kachur & Harrison, 1999, p. xiii-xiv). Charter schools appeared to be a logical extension of this movement, a way to reform schools along a new model of cost-cutting, efficiency, and competitiveness. According to Kachur (1999), the question was how public schooling can help develop a competitive edge in human capital, reduce government expenditures, and provide government services to an increasingly large and diverse group of clients. Hence, "Charter Schools are simply a logical extension of the emphasis on school choice that has been a hallmark of the PCs' education policy" (Wagner, 1999, p. 52).

Policy Entrepreneurs in Alberta

According to Kingdon (1995) a policy entrepreneur is someone willing to invest their resources in return for future policies that they favour. During the period of reform which led to charter school legislation, there appears to have been several key individuals pushing for such schools. Indeed, in the United States where charter schools continue to expand, both former and current presidents have supported and continue to publicly support the expansion of charters. Thus, in the U.S.,

> Major political leaders—especially the president and governors, but also prominent legislators— often play a central role in agenda setting. Because they frequently give speeches and hold press conferences, they can call attention to an issue and keep attention focused on it. (Fowler, 2000, p. 182)

With their influence as agenda setters, political leaders can thus sway the public towards focusing, and perhaps supporting, an issue they endorse. As Gereluk (2000) highlights, there does not appear to have been any parent groups or organized lobbies pushing for charter schools in Alberta prior to legislation (pp.8-9). Furthermore, charter school legislation was passed through the House discussion very quickly. During a House discussion, Premier Ralph Klein "responded that he was not sure what a charter school was" (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. 200). This is consistent with Levin (2005) who describes educational policy matters as problematic since, "There is, consequently, never enough time to think about the issues in sufficient depth. Important decisions are often made very quickly, with quite limited information and discussion" (p. 33).

Similar, Townsend (1988) found from his own interviews that "About half of the Canadian politicians lack an explicit conceptualization of the issues they discussed—they seem to move as speedily as possible to solutions, spending rather little time diagnosing problems" (p. 68). Thus, during 1993/1994, Halvar Johnson would be the current Minister of Education while Reno Bosetti was the deputy minister. Both individuals would be essential players in the development and subsequent legislation of charter schools (Gereluk, 2000; Wagner, 1998).

Taylor (2001) further suggests the noteworthy role of Jim Dinning as Education Minister in the early 1990s and subsequently treasurer in the Klein government. She expounds the direct influence and partnerships between business and governments as, "The consultations and reports orchestrated by governments legitimized the hegemonic work of such groups by producing 'truths' based on the discourses of educational and fiscal crisis and neoliberal solutions" (p.70). Hence, during his term as Minister and

subsequently as Alberta treasurer, Dinning appeared to exert a great deal of influence on pushing towards his particular vision of educational reform (p. 71). Taylor concludes by connecting the main ideas on a prevailing neoliberal public philosophy, Alberta's corporate history, and the role of political leaders:

> In Alberta the government has been receptive for several reasons. First, there was an ideological affinity between conservative politicians and the alliance of dissatisfied parents and employees. Key politicians such as Ralph Klein, Jim Dinning, and Stockwell Day managed to "unite the right" and manage tensions within the Conservative party, perhaps because of the neoliberal/neoconservative alliance that had formed. Therefore, the vision promoted by unhappy parents and dissatisfied employers has been consistent with the broader restructuring agenda being developed by the newly elected Klein government. Second, Alberta historically has been a corporate province in its blurring of lines between business and politics. ... Finally, certain bureaucrats had been frustrated in achieving their own agendas and were receptive to opportunities that might bring them to fruition. These factors help explain government actions in this period. (p. 96)

Another important actor during this movement was Joe Freedman, a former medical doctor, emerged as perhaps the most vocal proponent of charter schools. Freedman (1997) later pushed for charter schools to expand in Atlantic Canada. He argued that others jurisdictions across North America, many of which boast "superior public education systems" and have established charter schools because they clearly understand the advantages such schools offer public education. Freedman became a popular activist, visible in both the media and policy debates of the period. However, his voice has not

been as prominent in the eastern provinces, where charter schools have not been legislated. The role of political leadership and political climate in resulting charter school legislation must both be taken into consideration.

According to Townsend (1988), educational leaders in the Prairies appear to display a large degree of concord, and "most Prairie politicians do not even begin to outline all grievances that are possible about educational government" (p. 34). This degree of concord may help explain why charter schools were able to pass through legislation in what appears to have been a hostile policy environment at the time, and have faced significant criticisms since (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997; Gereluk, 2000; Kachur, 1999; Laird, 1998; Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Taylor, 2001). As Mead and Rotherman (2007) assert, charter school successes or failures are not simply a matter of chance. Political leadership and subsequent legislation drive the expansion and development of charter schools. The combination of several influences thus may have pushed Alberta towards charter school reform in 1994. According to Wagner (1998) these changes were based in a long standing tradition of pro choice policies in Albertan educational policy.

A Federal Presence?

Although the British North America Act of 1867 conceded to the provinces the exclusive jurisdiction over educational matters without specifying a role for the federal government, over time, a federal presence has managed to entrench itself in educational concerns. Thus, the federal government has maintained involvement in educational matters in a variety of ways. Historically, in contrast to the United States:

> In the years following 1867, therefore, each of the provinces continued to develop its own school system or systems. ... Similar "provincialism" might have also

> developed in the United States education, where education was a state rather than a federal responsibility. But American politicians and educators could at least agree on certain national political goals of schooling, consistent with the earlier views of Jefferson, Mann, and others. But no such agreement was possible in Canada, where provincial loyalties remained strong and where French- and English-speaking leaders emphasized different concepts on the relationship between schooling and patriotism. A federal office on education in the United States, created in 1867, was also able to encourage American schools towards national political goals. (Stamp, 1977, p. 32)

Indeed, Canada remains the only industrialized country without a federal office or department of education (Young & Levin, 1998). Although Canada has taken steps to encourage a more national approach to education with the creation of the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) in 1967, the Council has limited influence and has not significantly guided national education policies. Moreover, "The provinces and territories are unwilling to give up their constitutional control of education. They are prepared to co-operate, but only on their own terms; they certainly will not tolerate being told what to do by Ottawa" (Osborne, 1999, p. 72). The CMEC (2010) do not mention charter schools or the issue of school choice in Canada when discussing current educational prerogatives. The lack of a significant federal presence in Canadian education contrasts starkly to the United States, particularly with more recent developments such as No Child Left Behind.

Both President Barack Obama and former President George W. Bush had publicly stated their support of the idea of charter schools. A recent Gallup poll found that

Americans support more federal involvement in educational matters (Saad, 2010). Insofar as seeking a national approach to the charter school movement, "Canada also lacks a well-developed national infrastructure for spreading ideas about education, so that people in one province tend not to learn much from the experience of other provinces" (Young & Levin, 1998, p. 299). According to Soroka (2002a), "inter-newspaper consistency in coverage is greater when issue salience is high. The idea of a single newspaper agenda, then, is likely on stronger ground during periods of heightened issue salience" (p. 43). With a stronger federal presence, specifically one with an agenda to promote school choice, charter schools might have a greater opportunity be able to expand outside of Alberta.

Teachers' Unions

In discussions of school choice and charter schools, teachers' unions have emerged as the most vocal of opponents to educational reform (Lawton et al., 1999). The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) and its affiliates have also adopted policy to oppose charter schools and similar initiatives which they perceive undermine the democratic principles of public education (Raham, 1998). According to The Fraser Institute (1999), in Canada, opposition to charter schools is still led by teachers' unions. The arguments expressed are borrowed from the earlier rhetoric of their American colleagues, relying on fears and misapprehensions which to a large degree have proven unfounded. These centre on equity, access, elitism, and competition. Bauni Mackay, former president of the Alberta Teachers' Association, lead early opposition by declaring,

> Education will not be improved by introducing competition through such things as charter schools. Competition means winners and losers. We can and should

> provide every child with the best. A strong public education system doesn't aim to create winners and losers. It aims for equity and not self-serving elitism. (The Fraser Institute, 1999, "Changing union positions," (para. 6)

Charter school reforms typically include discussion concerning the negotiation of salaries between principles and non-unionized teachers. Indeed, "Because more than 80 percent of the education budget goes into paying people, efforts to control education costs often involve efforts to control salaries" (Levin, 2005, p. 123). Cibulka (2000) contextualizes the current debate as:

> From the viewpoint of teachers unions, what distinguishes choice from reform proposals for educational standards, reconstitution of failing schools, and various school restructuring schemes is that they threaten the existing structure of public education, including the stature of unions in the present institutional arrangements. (p. 150)

Although the Alberta Teachers' Federation (ATA) did not fully endorse many of the changes including charter schools during the 1990s (Taylor, 2001), the relationship between the provincial government and British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) appears to have been more harmonious. A strong alliance between teachers and provincial government since the inception of the Social Credit appears to have lead to a province which maintains a good relationship between the parties. According to Ungerleider (1996), teachers in British Columbia, through constant conflict and resolution, have achieved a measure of professional autonomy and influence unparalled in North America. Thus, in response to neoliberal influences in school reform, the BCTF has appeared successful in resisting major changes that have appeared in other provinces.

Ungerleider also notes the creation of the College of Teachers as a significant barrier towards the deprofessionalization of teachers that has occupied elsewhere such as Britain and the United States. In 1995—which was the same year that the agenda setting analysis noted the highest degree of salience for charter schools—the BCTF released a position paper asserting the negative implications of charter schools. Although there have been criticism towards the educational reforms occurring since the election of the Campbell government in 2001 (Fallon & Paquette, 2008), there appears to have been little movement towards charter schools. This supports the agenda setting results found in this study, with British Columbia providing the least amount of salience overall towards charter school s specifically.

However, Canadian teacher federations appear to have been better able to resist charter school reform. Are Canadian teacher unions stronger than their American counterparts? Although both nations have moved, to some degree, towards educational reform in the form of increased choice, American education—as evidenced by the proliferation of charter schools—has gone significantly further than Canada. Hence, it appears that, "Despite these trends, market-based educational reforms, both as a focus for public debate and in their implementation, appear to be less pervasive in Canada than in many other jurisdictions, including several American states" (Wotherspoon, 2009, p. 90). However, In the United States, the relative strength of teachers' unions has not appeared to have any relevance on the legislation (as well as type of charter law). For example, Michigan's teacher association, which is regarded as one of the most influential political actors in the state, saw one of the nation's most favourable charter laws enacted. In contrast, in Georgia a much weaker teachers association saw a relatively unfavourable

charter law introduced (Hassel, 1999). In the United States however, "Choice advocates are too well organized, with significant financial backing from business groups and conservatively oriented foundations" (Cibulka, 2000, p. 152).

Although interest groups continue to promote choice in Canada (The Fraser Institute, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education) they appear to be less influential. In Canada, none of the national teachers' associations in Canada plays a significant role in provincial or national educational policy (Young & Levin, 1998, p. 52). Although Canadian teachers are generally better paid, more respected, and professionalized than their American counterparts, the relative influence of Canadian teacher associations and their ability to directly resist charter school reform appears quite powerful. However,

> There are differences across the country in how willing teachers' unions are to cooperate with changes proposed by provincial ministries of education. Debates within teachers' unions about schools reform and industrial unionism will have a dramatic impact on ... the extent to which schools can diversify. (Gaskell, 2002, p. 50)

Teachers' unions along with specific political cultures and policy environments appear to exert an influence on school choice and charter schools in Canada.

Deference to Authority

The notion or perception of deference to authority may further provide a useful framework to examine educational comparisons between the United States and Canada (Friedenberg, 1980). Although educational comparisons between the two countries must be diligent and made with care, they may nevertheless be highly instructive in an

academic and public policy manner (Wilson & Lazerson, 1982). Deference holds its basis in the historical formation of both nations. According to Lipset (1968), American resistance to authority and assertion of individual autonomy is rooted in their revolutionary tradition. Canadians, without their own history of revolution, lead to a more conservative and community-oriented society. These contrasting notions are made apparent by the U.S. constitutional basis in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" while Canadians have been defined by "peace, order, and good government." Hence, "When the English did come in numbers to Canada, they were often the products not of a quest for a revolutionary new society, but of a counter-revolutionary preference for traditional patterns" (Prentice, 1970, p. 66). Moreover, "It has been Canada's unique social composition that has informed its recognition and accommodation of group rights" (Wiseman, 2007, p. 267).

In respect to educational matters, as they pursue educational efficiency and effectiveness, as

> Canadians demonstrate a greater willingness than Americans to trade off autonomy in pursuit of equity, a contrast that can be traced to the political values in ascendance at the time the two nations formed. Canadians tend to defer to authority—they were after all loyal to the crown—in return for a relatively equal allocation of government services, including education. (Lawton, 2001, p. 4)

Pitsula and Manley-Casimir (1989) frame this discussion in respect to elite accommodation theory, which posits that Canadians are willing to permit the exercise of considerable power by their leaders, including in legal matters of education; thus:

> It follows that a society characterized by the concept of "elite accommodation" would encourage respect for authority figures in schools and feature built-in resistance to change. ... The American egalitarian ethos, on the other hand, would be expected to encourage ... more parental legal challenges to the professional judgments of educational administrators. (p. 14)

The Canadian tradition of deference, particularly if defined towards the authority of teacher professionals, may highlight the strong resistance that teachers associations have been able to mount against charter schools as discussed above. However, this tradition may be changing, both in education and other aspects of Canadian culture. As Guppy and Davies (1999) point out,

> Today's cohort of Canadian parents is the most educated and informed in history. Parent-led interest groups are less deferential towards the educational establishment and are more likely to feel entitled to challenge experts. ... Demands for school choice in Canada epitomize these processes. (p. 278)

Therefore, although the notion that Canadians remain largely deferential is by no means certain (Nevitte, 1996), as a theory it may provide a partial explanation towards the questions surrounding the lack of charter schools in Canada. The Canadian notion of deference may also provide a particular understanding of the Canadian tendency to be more cautious and incremental in our approach to policy shifts and educational reform.

Moderate, Incremental Change

A final framework with which may further provide an explanation towards the lack of charter schools in Canada is a historical tendency towards incrementalism in

educational policymaking. Canadians, as a whole, tend to endorse a slow, moderate approach to changes in governance as they

> indicate historical nervousness about leaving schools vulnerable to innovations or reforms created for political reasons, schools rarely change quickly precisely because they were designed not to shift according to each gust of any prevailing political wind. Such ponderous conservatism is out of step with today's hunger for "just-in-time" institutions. (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. 115)

This again contrasts directly with the United States' pattern of reform. Indeed, "The great mass of literature on these two North-American democracies suggests the United States is more achievement-oriented, universalistic, egalitarian, and self-oriented than Canada" (Lipset, 1968, p. 32). Although there appears to be a great deal of change and reform in Canadian schools over the past two decades, Canada's approach to school reform is relatively modest (Young & Levin, 1998, p. 299). As Prentice (1970) articulates:

> Clearly, American education has been more widespread, dynamic, and innovative that has Canadian, reflecting both more a dynamic society and a higher level of social dislocation than Canada has so far known. The universality, dynamism, and diversity of American education have also produced pressures for conformity and a sense of alienation yet to be equaled north of the forty-ninth parallel. The dilemma in Canadian education has often been seen, whether rightly or wrongly, in terms of whether to opt in or opt out of the American utopia. (p. 66)

In other Anglo-American educational regimes, policies to create increased competition between schools have been more incremental and less transformative, but the underlying

theory expounding the need for increased parental liberty and provider efficiency is essentially the same (Manzer, 2003, p. 334). In a legal sense, perhaps

> we are "slow Americans" because Americans have traditionally demonstrated a greater willingness to initiate litigation in order to ensure that educational policies and practices satisfy the requirements of the constitution. Canadians on the other hand, have sought redress through the political process rather than through the courts. (Pitsula & Manley-Casimir, 1989, p. 26)

Lastly, the notions of deference and moderatism are noted by Young and Levin, 1998): "Because of provincial control over education and the lack of a strong national presence, reforms occur province by province, and provinces tend not to want to be too different from one another in their basic approach to education" (p. 299). A tendency to defer to authority, particularly in respect to educational authorities, may characterize Canadian education and may thus have played a role in remaining largely satisfied with traditional public schools and institutional arrangements, and thus far, remained resistant to systematic changes, such as charter schools.

Conclusions From the Study

Overall, this study has attempted to shed light on the charter school debate as it exists today. While the movement towards school choice and charters has grown significantly over the past two decades around the globe, Canada has not embraced such measures to the same extent. Compared to the 1990s, the past 10 years have appeared to have been a period when school choice, and charter schools in particular, lost their momentum in educational circles. None of the Canadian provinces chose to follow

Alberta's lead with charter schools, and as an issue, appears to have gradually declined in salience by the public. Why this has occurred is the more difficult question to answer.

The best explanation for charter schools in Canada appears to be that of a "perfect storm" line of reasoning, where several key factors came together around the same time in Alberta. The mixture of a political culture which is characteristic of being the most American in Canada, the election of a conservative government keen on deficit reduction and neoconservative ideology, along with similar reforms serving as models internationally all came together at once, creating the opportunity for those who saw charter schools as the solution to education. These individuals took advantage of such a policy window to push their ideas through, although not without considerable resistance. When the storm passed, Alberta was left with legislation allowing for the formation of up to 15 charter schools. There currently exists only 13 such schools in the entire province, and in the nation as a whole. The simple fact that charter schools have not been able to find a niche in almost all of the provinces speaks to the deeply rooted values and traditions of Canadian education.

Although in many ways this study lends support to the notion of Canadian regionalism and distinctive political cultures, it supports just as strongly the conception of a Canadian national identity with regard to education. As Goddard (2000) elaborates:

> There is among the Canadian public an overarching belief in the moral rightness of a public education system. This system is based on the historical coming-together of three distinct models: the English grammar school, the French parish school, and the United Empire Loyalist belief in local governance. As such, it is a distinctly Canadian system of which the options that will lead to the cultural and

> economic assimilation of Canada. In that context, the biggest perceived plus of the Canadian system is simply that it is not American, that it does not reflect American practice, and that there are at least the vestiges of it being driven by pedagogical rather than economic imperatives. (para. 26)

In an era where the forces of globalization increasingly appear to affect our daily lives and the rhetoric of neoliberalism imparts itself in public education and elsewhere, Canada has appeared to have remained grounded to the idea, beliefs, and conventions which make it unique. According to Li (2010), funding for elementary and secondary education in Canada continues to be more equitable than that in the United States, where significant variations remain between states. The anti-American flavour of Canadian education is also noted by Osborne (1999) where he describes it as:

> Canada has long prided itself on being a mosaic rather (than) an American-style melting pot, a society in which every group can retain its own identity while also forming part of a larger whole. In a mosaic, however, the separate pieces combine to form a coherent design that has a pattern and a unity of its own. The whole is more than the pieces that make it up. The question that faces schools as they respond to the demands for more choice and variety is how far they can go without abandoning some sort of experience that all students share as they grow into adult citizens. (p. 157)

Canadians have long valued public schools for their sense of community, national identity, and citizenship, and have perhaps remained committed to these ideals into the 21st century.

If charter schools begin to appear on the Canadian educational landscape, they will no doubt be influenced by ideas from our closest ally. Charter schools have seemingly established themselves in American education and Canada is not isolated or insulated as a nation. Ideas flow in and out, and in-between, our provinces at all times. Yet, even the rapid growth of charter schools in the United States has not significantly changed the traditional delivery and organization of education. Of more importance to the visibility and accessibility of charter schools, roughly 89% of American school districts have no charter schools within their boundaries. Overall then, while the number of charter schools and students has continued to grow, the chance that a typical American student will attend a charter school (or even know someone who does) is still extremely small (Christensen et al., 2010. Sarason (1998), for instance, provides an institutional and organizational perspective on the establishment of charter schools in the United States, and is critical of their potential to generate any significant lasting educational reforms.

Whether or not the time has passed for charter schools in Canada also remains difficult to conclude. For those who favour charter reforms, they must become more vocal than ever before if they wish for such to find a place in Canadian education. Fowler (2000) recommends that educational leaders seek out media attention, union support, or hold a conference if possible to place an issue on the agenda. However, this may only be a start. A receptive political climate, likely Conservative in nature, appears essential to help push through such reforms. Even then, fundamental opposition throughout education in Canada would likely resist such changes. According to Goddard (2000), school choice is, in essence, a non issue for Canadians. It appears that Canadians

would rather fix the problems of the current system rather than flee it for other arrangements.

Hence, for those who oppose charter schools as an assault on public education, they may find comfort in the fact that Canadians have resisted reform for two decades now, while the issue for increased choice, especially charter schools, does not appear to be on the agenda for Canadians at this time. Again, it remains difficult to say conclusively that charter schools will never exist outside of Alberta, or even if they will expand in Alberta. According to Fowler (2000), "Usually, a new idea languishes on the shelf for a long time before it reaches a governmental policy agenda" (p. 182). Yet, after almost two decades of debate, it appears that Canadians have made their decision concerning charter schools.

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